

時雨沢恵

KEIICHI SIGAWA

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KUROBOSHI

キノの旅 XII

the Beautiful World



電撃文庫

Land of Charity ~How's Tricks?~

Support a Traveler Today!

The Traveler's Aid Society calls upon all citizens today to act upon our nation's motto of Charity, lending a helping hand to less fortunate travelers.

Not long ago, we were again visited by a traveler in need. The traveler's name is Kino, a very young visitor who appears to be only about fifteen years old. She entered our country with her partner, a motorrad named Hermes.

She is the first visitor to grace our presence in exactly two hundred and thirty days.

When asked why she chose to visit our country, she answered, "It's because I heard that this country was known for its delicious food". Was she just embarrassed, we wonder. In any event, it was a very sincere and heartwarming answer.

But like other travelers, even someone so kind as Kino continues to live a very difficult life.

"What do I usually eat? Sometimes I catch fish at a river or hunt animals, but usually I subsist on portable rations." She said to us plainly.

How does this speak to us? We live in a country covered in fertile soil, graced by bountiful harvest after bountiful harvest. The phrase 'death by starvation' has long since passed out of common usage. How difficult must it be, living on tasteless rations every day?

"I'm used to it by now." Kino replied, but don't let her strong front fool you.

When we asked about her homeland, Kino was as calm as ever.

"My homeland? It no longer exists."

We could not bear to ask any further.

To be perfectly frank, we were lost for words.

Could anyone dare to delve any deeper?

Our lives are peaceful. We live every day in the land of our birth, surrounded by the very people who were there since infancy. Why is a young traveller like Kino constantly on the move, with no place to call home? How great must be the sadness of her loss?

"My dream for the future? Well, I wonder... I'd like to survive and continue my journey." Kino told us.

What resolve! What dauntlessness! Despite the constant hunger, the potential of natural disasters, and the threat of assault, her purpose is "To Live".

It broke our hearts to understand that even something so simple was something so difficult for a traveller.

"My persuader? It's called [Cannon]. It's very old."

Kino's weapon is a revolver old enough to be called an antique. The sad truth of her journey is that she has little else with which to defend herself in her travels through the untamed wilderness. There is no denying that she would feel much safer with the newest automatic models.

And yet, Kino continues her desperate struggle for survival.

"Sometimes during my travels, I come across very beautiful sights. And some countries I visit treat me very kindly."

Our nation must not lose in supporting such a warm-hearted human being. We can be of help to travelers like Kino!

~

You can make a difference

The Traveler's Aid Society is supported by your generous donations. Why not lend a helping hand to Kino as she continues her difficult but courageous journey of survival? The price of a single cup of morning coffee is enough to buy a day's worth of portable rations. Though we are forbidden by law from leaving our country, we can support travelers like her on their way. Why not send your hearts on a journey along with Kino?

Kino's departure date is tomorrow evening. If you make a deposit to the following account by tomorrow at noon, the Traveller's Aid Society will take responsibility for making sure it reaches Kino. Your generous donations will support her as she shops for supplies like rations, fuel, and oil. The collected funds will by no means be sent wholly to another country.

Send all donations to:

National Bank (Central Branch)

Account # 4930-1544

All cheques payable to: The Traveller's Aid Society

*Please make sure to specify "Kino support fund" on your cheque.

キノの旅

XII

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢恵一

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「山賊達の話」

—Can You Imagine!—

山の中に、二人の山賊がいました。
一人はすでに八十歳は超えていようか
といふ、頭巾巻だけのお爺さんです。もう一人は、十代の中頃に見える若い少年で
した。

二人がいるのは、二つの山の頂上付近でした。そこからは、緑が豊かな広い谷を挟んで、反対側の山肌がよく見えます。そこにある道もよく見えました。

二人とも、大きな双輪鎌を腰でいました。円い視界の中に、山肌を下る道を取っていました。

ある日の二人です。

「長老、車が一台来ました。」

「うむ。僕にも見えた。観察して報告なさい。」

「はい。緑色のパギーです。荷物をたくさん載せていました。運転手は、セーターを着た黒髪の若い男です。壁に面しているのは、気に見えます。助手席に小さな女の子が見えます。その足の間に、白い動物が見えました。また、大きな犬です。」

「うむ。——さて、あの道中は僕らの、雅として相応しいか否か。谷にいる昔

に連絡して、譲るべきか否か? 考えでみなさい。」

「はい。——僕は相応しいと思います。」

「ふむ。子の理由は?」

「あの、バギーは珍しい型です。とても高く売れそうです。積んでいる荷物も多いですから、何か金目の物を踏襲代わりに持つていると思います。運転手の男は腕が立ちそぞうですが、なんだかんだ人だけですし、剣を抜く力には勝てません。女の子と犬は、おもろいと思いません。」

「うう。——四十点じや。あれは譲つては駄目じや。」

「なぜですか、長老?」

「エーバギーは確かに高く売れるそうじや。」

それはいいしかし、あの男はかなりの豪腕

といった豪腕気があるぞ。それにだ、女の子をよく見なさい。握っている物は何が分

かるかね?」

「圓(まん)ぼ、丸い物です……。袋ですか? 人形ですか?」

「いいや、手荷物じや。」

「……」

「女の子の席の隣に荷が出ているのが見え

るか? あれはダッシュードランチャー」とつて手榴弾型の弾頭を遠くに撃ち出す武器じや。食らったら數人は吹き飛んでしま

う。それに、犬は鳥がさく。待ち伏せは、簡単にはれてしまつじゃろう。あれは、

「なぜですか、長老?」



A Tale of Bandits
~Can You Imagine!~

A pair of bandits were setting up an ambush in the mountains.

One of them was an elderly man, his face gnarled with age. The other was a young man in his mid-teens.

They were standing by a mountain peak. Below them was a valley carpeted by a thick green forest. The opposite side of the valley was clearly visible. So was the road that snaked through the base of the valley.

They were both holding large binoculars. The round frame of their vision was focused on the road at the base of the valley.

One day--

"Elder, I see a car passing through."

"Yes, as do I. Observe and report."

"Yes, sir. The vehicle is a green buggy laden with a large quantity of luggage. The driver is a black-haired man wearing a sweater. I can see something like a sword lying beside him. In the passenger seat is... a little girl. I see a white animal between her knees. It's most likely a dog."

"I see. Now tell me, do you think they are fit to be our prey? Should we contact the others at the base of the valley and have them attack?"

"Yes, I believe we should, sir."

"I see. And why is that?"

"Buggies are extremely hard to come by. I'm sure it'll fetch a good price. And judging from all the luggage they're carrying, I believe they are carrying valuables in stead of money. The man at the wheel could possibly be a skilled foe, but he is by himself, and could not possibly defeat our guns with a sword alone. The girl and the dog are not even worth discussing."

"Forty points. We must not attack that buggy."

"Why is that, elder?"

"As you said, the buggy will likely fetch a hefty sum. But the man in the driver's seat is composed and ready. He is likely a swordsman without compare. And look once more at the girl. Do you recognize the object she is holding?"

"Something black... and round. Is that a bag? Or maybe a doll?"

"That is a grenade."

"..."

"Do you see the cylinder sticking out beside the girl's seat? That is a grenade launcher. It can attack us from a distance. One wrong move and we could lose many men at once. And remember that dogs have very sensitive noses. Our ambush would be discovered instantly. That is why we must not attack that buggy."

別の日の一人です。

「長老。モトトラド（注：二輪車。空を飛ばないものだけを指す）が台来ました」

「うむ。僕にも見えた。観察して報告しなさい」

「はい。銀色のタンクのモトトラドです。後輪脇と上に旅荷物を積んでいます。運転手は黒いジャケットを着て、右腰にはリュックルバーを吊っています。若い人間です。僕と同じくらいです。男の子……、いえ、あれは女の子です。……年が近い僕には分かります！ とても可愛い女の子ですよ！ 可愛いなあ……」

「ふむ、確かに言われてみれば女の子の子に見えるな。目が大きくて、なかなかの別嬪さんじゃ。——さて、あのモトトラド乗りは僕らの『獲物』として相応しいか否か？ 谷にいる皆に連絡して、襲うべきか否か？」
〔答えてみなさい〕

「簡単です！ 絶対に襲うべきです！ だって、リュックルバーを持つているといつても、女の子一人ですよ——とてもいい力もじゃないですか！ 簡単な獲物です。すぐに皆に連絡しましょう。あのモトトラドは高く売れますよ！ —

〔駄目じや。零点じや〕

「な、なぜですか？」
長老。僕には分かりません……」

「では教えてあげよう。法律も警察もな
いこの世界を旅するのは、とてもとても危険じや。僕らみたない山賊がいつどこで襲つてきてとも不思議じやない」

〔だからこそ、女の子の一人旅はいい目標なのではないですか？〕

〔逆じやよ。見た目で騙されはなんらん。一人で旅をしているといふことは、一人で旅ができる。ということなのだじやよ。あ

の子は、ああ見えてきっと、数々の修羅場をくり抜けしてきた豪腕じや。うかつに手を出したたら、こちゅうの被害もただならん。モトトラド一台のために仲間が何人も死んではならん〕



It was yet another day.

"Elder. I can see a motorrad passing through."

"Yes, as do I. Observe and report."

"Yes, sir. The motorrad has a silver tank. There is luggage loaded on either side of the back wheel and on top of it. The rider is wearing a black jacket, and has a revolver in a holster over his right thigh. He's still young--around my age, I'd guess... Wait! That's a girl! I can tell because she's around my age! She's a very pretty girl! Wow..."

"I see. Now that you mention it, you're right. Those large eyes of hers are quite beautiful. Now tell me, do you think she is fit to be our prey? Should we contact the others at the base of the valley and have them attack?"

"Of course, sir! We can't let her get away! She's carrying a revolver, but what can one girl do on her own? She's the perfect target. This will be an easy job! Let's get in touch with the others right away, sir. And I'm sure that motorrad will fetch a good price, too!"

"Zero points."

"S-sir? I don't understand. Why not?"

"Listen well. To travel this world, where there are no laws or people to uphold them, is a perilous undertaking. It is nothing unusual for travelers to be attacked by bandits."

"Isn't that exactly why a girl alone is the perfect target, elder?"

"It's the very opposite, boy. Don't be fooled by appearances. The fact that she is traveling alone means that she is capable of such a thing. She is probably a skilled opponent--a veritable veteran, I would surmise. I would not be surprised if she were willing to murder to keep possession of her motorrad. Would you be willing to risk the lives of our allies for one measly vehicle?"

"..."

"My boy, the people we target must be those who delude themselves into thinking that they are strong. Those who do not think before attacking those stronger than themselves. Just like you are now."

"..."

"There, there. Don't let that get you down. You are still young, after all. You have plenty of time to learn."

"Yes, elder... Sir, I heard once that we began scoping out our targets ahead of time like this only after you joined the assault team."

"Yes. I came up with this idea."

「俺らが狙うべきなのは、自分は強いと勘違いして、自分より強い人間にうかつに手を出すような人間じや。——ちょうど今のお主のようにな」

「…………」

「そう気を落とすな。まだまだお主は若いこれからいろいろと学べばいい」

「はい……どうろで長老こうして事前に見張りを立てるらにならたのは、長老が襲撃チームになった頃からと聞きま

した

「そつじや、これは僕の発案じや」「素晴らしい思いつきだと思ひます。どうやで思ひつけたのですか?」

「ああ……。あれは、遠い昔のある日のことじゃ。また若かった僕は、皆で、齊に通りかかった旅人を襲つた。小さくて黄色くてボロボロの車じやたが……。少しはたになると、思つてしまふ。へらへらした若い男と、長い黒髪の美女が乗つておった……」

「三人だけなら、見事に仕留めんだよね?」

「長老? 泣いてるのですか?」

「逃げろ! みんな逃げる! ——」

「ちょ、長老! しっかりしてください!」



"It's an amazing idea, sir. What inspired you?"

"Well... It was something that happened one day, a very long time ago. I was still young, you see. That day, we all attacked a passing pair of travelers. It was... a battered yellow car, but at the time... I thought it might fetch a decent price... And there was a man with a terrifying smirk... And a beautiful woman with long black hair..."

"If it was only the two of them, I suspect you must have had no problem at all, elder."

"..."

"Sir?"

"...Th-they were... demons! Th-th-that day... I saw the very face of hell... W-we must n-never allow such a thing to happen... ever again..."

"Elder? Sir, are you crying?"

"...G-get away, everyone! Fall back! R-retreat!"

"Elder! Snap out of it!"

「やつ」『旅人さん。そしてギトランさん。

「日本の国は初めてですか?』

「はい』『だだだ』

「それまでは、ぜひとも、滞在を楽しんで

してへんやん』

「ひくわ』『そくすゆ』

「うりひだ、ちよと手前勝手で恐縮な

ですがね』

「はい』『ん?』

「実は私、旅人さんが来られる度に観察を

して、その旅のスタイルを考察し、国民に

発表しております。旅人観察者、として、

JG國ではちよいと知られている存在なの

ですよ』

「まあ……」「どんなふう?』

「今まで見てきたいろいろな旅人さんの情

報を読みたまでの考察なのですが——

「はあ」「ふむふむ』

「まず、V型ツインエンジンのモトラードに乗

つて旅をするというのは、三十二年前に来

「パクリの国」

— I Have Ever Seen Before. —

「はあ……」「んー、おっちゃん、ただ者じやないね』

「いやはや、ただ無駄に歳をとっているだけ

ですよ。——あと、耳を覆ったれの付い

た帽子ですけどね』

「はあ……」「ふむふむ』

「二十年前JGの国に来た、北方旅鳥の一

団のトレーナーマークでしたね。彼らのワイル

ドな格好は、「この国でも」世話を風靡しまし

た。あなたもそれに感化されたと見ました

が』

「はあ……」「おっちゃん、説すや』

「はははは……いやあ、実は私も彼らのまね

セブトに感銘を受けたのですね』

「ふむ、その右腕のリヴァーバー』

「はあ」「それは』

「三年前に来た、ジャッカルズ」と名乗った

流れの傭兵集団と同じです。彼らは自動

式を嫌って、確実性のあるリヴァーバーを

常に使っていました。あなたは、彼らのコノ

セブトに感銘を受けたのですね』



Land of Plagiarism
~I Have Ever Seen Before~

"Welcome, traveler and motorrad. Is this your first time in our country?"

"That's correct."

"Yep."

"I see. Then I hope you have a wonderful stay."

"Thank you."

"We will."

"By the way, excuse me if this is a bit rude, but..."

"Yes?"

"What is it?"

"Actually, whenever a traveler comes to our country, I observe them briefly and analyze their travel style, and report it to the citizens. I'm something of a Traveler Expert in these parts, you see."

"Oh. Right..."

"How so?"

"Looking back on all the information I collected on the many travelers I've seen, and analyzing that data in conjunction with your appearance..."

"Yes?"

"I can't wait to hear!"

"First of all, you came riding a V-twin engine motorrad--the very same style adopted by a traveler named Clark, who visited this country thirty-two years ago. It is obvious that your style has been influenced by his."

"Really?"

"Wow! That's amazing!"

"Haha, this is nothing, I assure you."

"..."

"What else?"

"Hm... that revolver of yours..."

"Huh..."

をして冬はよくかぶつたものですよー」

「はあ……」「他は?」

「その茶色のコートなんんですけど」

「はい」「おう」

「その長い茶色のコート……」

「はい」「ふむふむ」

「それは実にオリジナリティ溢れています

いますよ! 実に新しい! 私もこれから、会った人にあなたの才覚を吹聴したいと思います。もしよろしければ、お名前をいただけませんか?」

「キノ。——キノです」



「ね!」

「はい?」「え?」

「今まで、そのような長くて茶色のコート

を着て旅をしていた人を見た」とがない。

何とも斬新だ!」

「…………」

「そのアイデア、みんなに自慢していくと思

"What about it?"

"It's identical to the model carried by a group of wandering mercenaries called 'The Jackals', who visited us three years ago. They disliked automatics, so they only used revolvers. It seems their influence is strong in you."

"Huh..."

"Wow, Kino. This guy's the real deal!"

"Not at all! It all comes with age, you see. And about that hat of yours, with the ear flaps on the sides..."

"Huh..."

"Yes? Yes?"

"It was the trademark of a group called 'The Northern Foxes', which came to our country twenty-one years ago. Their outlandish sense of fashion was quite the hit here in our homeland for some time."

"Huh."

"You're so smart, mister!"

"Hahaha! Just between us, I also copied them and wore one of those hats during the winter myself."

"Huh..."

"What else?"

"That brown coat of yours..."

"Yes?"

"Oh!"

"A long brown coat..."

"Yes?"

"Yes? Yes?"

"It's so very original!"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"In all my years, I've never seen a traveler wear a long brown coat like yours. It's truly inspired!"

"..."

"..."

"This is an absolutely novel idea! It's the kind of idea you should spread to the world! I'd like to tell other travelers about your sense of fashion in the future. If it's not too much trouble, may I ask for your name?"

"Kino. My name is Kino."

「願い」

「ねえキノ」

「なんだい？」
エルメス

「死なないでね」

「——いきなりなんだい？ 進む先に、落ちたら死ぬかもしれない穴もある？」

「穴はないよ。ふと思つたんだけど、キノが生きているから、こうして走つていられる。もちろん別の人気が乗つてもいいけど、キノほど走つてくれるか分からん。だから、キノには死なないでほしいと思つた。まだ言つてないから、『応言つてお』うかなと思つて」

「分かつた。確かに聞いた。——ボクは、死なないように最大限努力するよ。エルメスのことも鑑みて」

「よろしく頼むね」

「よろしく頼まれた。——じゃあ、『うちからも、エルメスに』つ頼み事をしようかな」

「聞きましたよ」

「朝早く起きて、朝早く起きて、朝早く起きて、朝早く起きて、朝早く起きてほしい」

「…………」

「聞こえた？」

「…………」

「エルメス？」

「ぐ」



A Request

"Kino?"

"What is it, Hermes?"

"Don't die."

"What's with you all of a sudden? Is there a lethal pitfall ahead?"

"Nope. I just thought of something, that's all. I can only move around like this because you're alive, Kino. I guess I could give other people a ride, too, but I wouldn't know if they'd ride me around as much as you do. That's why I don't want you to die. I just wanted to tell you, since I never did before."

"All right. I'll do my best to survive. I'll take good care of you, too, Hermes."

"I'm counting on you."

"I understand. Then I guess this means I can ask you for something, too."

"Okay. What is it?"

"Wake up early in the morning, wake up early in the morning."

"..."

"Are you listening?"

"..."

"Hermes?"

"Zzzzz..."

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Afterword

The fact that you cry

The fact that you lose your temper

The fact that you get angry

The fact that you hate

The fact that you scream

The fact that you suffer

The fact that you mourn

The fact that you despair

Or the fact that you come to a resolution

Cannot prove that you are right.

~Everybody Has the Right to Make Mistakes~



プロローグ

「幸せの中で・b」

—Birth・b—

Prologue - In Happiness - b
~Birth - b~

And so, Kino and Hermes arrived at the entrance to the large hospital.

Several nurses were standing at the door to say goodbye. Waiting outside was a black car. The driver thoughtfully opened the door for his coming passengers.

Kino stopped Hermes behind the car and watched.

Finally, the happy young couple emerged from behind the hospital doors, showered with words of blessings. They were smiling. The husband was carrying a large bag, and his wife was holding a basket in her arms.

The couple repeatedly thanked the nurses who had taken care of the mother, embracing them joyously.

And as they made their way to the car, they spotted Kino and Hermes.

"Well, if it isn't the traveler! Look! Our third baby."

The woman beamed as she showed Kino and Hermes the baby inside the basket.

"That's wonderful. Congratulations." Kino said.

"Thank you!" The couple smiled brightly.

"Are you headed for the Centre now?" Hermes asked. The man and the woman shook their heads.

"Not yet. We're going to hurry home and show him to his siblings first!" The wife said.

And,

"We'll take him to the Centre straightaway after that."



第一話
「正義の国」
— Idiots —

Chapter 1 - Land of Justice
~Idiots~

A motorrad was moving along a path between the sea and the plains.

The sky was perfectly clear. A clean blue sea stretched out into the horizon under the blazing sun. A narrow beach of white sand served as a line dividing the ocean from the verdant green fields.

The white path ran in an unnaturally straight line from the north to the south. The motorrad was moving southward in a perfectly straight line.

Atop the motorrad's back wheel was a black box, on top of which was a bag. A fuel tank and a water container were secured to it with rope, along with a sleeping bag.

The motorrad continued along the path that divided the plain from the beach.

The young human who was riding on the motorrad was wearing a white shirt and a black vest.

She wore a hat with flaps over her ears, and over her right thigh was a holstered revolver-type hand persuader. Behind her back was holstered another persuader, an automatic type secured horizontally to her waist.

The rider suddenly looked up from the road.

"..."

Black clouds were layered on the southern horizon.

"It's so dark over there. I wonder why." The motorrad said. The rider answered.

"I wonder if it'll feel a bit cooler over there."

The next morning.

A lone motorrad was moving under the grey skies.

Yesterday's clear weather was nowhere in sight, replaced by thick cloud cover. The sun to the east was only just bright enough to be seen. Everything--the plains, the beach--was dark. The sea, faithfully reflecting the colour of the sky, looked as though drops of ink had been mixed into it.

Today, the rider was wearing a black jacket, which was the same vest from yesterday with the sleeves attached.

"Good for you, Kino. It's not so hot anymore." The motorrad said.

"Yeah. In fact, I'm almost feeling cold." The rider named Kino answered, "I wonder why it's so dark? It's still the middle of the day. And these clouds don't look normal. What do you think, Hermes?" She asked the motorrad.

"Maybe there was a volcanic eruption somewhere far away." The motorrad named Hermes answered.

"An eruption? So you mean this is all volcanic ash?"

"Not quite. Volcanic ash is relatively heavy, so it settles down quickly over the ground. But this isn't it. The clouds above us are all the lighter stuff floating in clumps. They rode the wind and ended up all the way here."

"Huh... So will it stay this way for a while, do you think?"

"Probably. I guess it depends on the force of the eruption, but it might not clear up for a year or two. Or maybe even longer."

Kino frowned.

"And I was looking forward to going to a warmer place..."

"Maybe you should think about a change of plans."

The lone motorrad continued under the grey skies.

The next day.

Kino was riding along, wearing her coat.

Under her coat she wore her black jacket. She secured the flaps of her coat by wrapping them around her thighs. Over her mouth and nose was a bandanna. Her ear flaps were down, and secured together with a strap under her chin.

The sky grew darker and darker. Now it was nearly impossible to see where the sun was. Although it was midday, the world of the sea and the plain was too dim to even read a book. The pitch-black sea scattered onto the shore in white foam.

Hermes' headlight was turned on, lighting the way ahead. He was moving much slower than the previous day.

"I don't know about this, Kino. It's just getting darker and darker." Hermes said.

"You're right. Darker and darker, huh." Kino mumbled, disappointed, "and it's cold, too-- almost like winter. And I was looking forward to a warm country... I was really looking forward to that land of year-round summer..."

"What do you think? We can still turn back, right?"

"We can. I guess I shouldn't be too stubborn. We'll go back to the previous country and head west." Kino said, letting go of the gas lever. Hermes slowed down little by little, before finally coming to a complete stop.

"Some warm tea sounds really good right about now." Kino turned off the ignition.

Hermes' headlight went off. Everything went silent and dark. Then, Kino noticed something.

"Hm?"

"Oh!"

On the road ahead, slightly above the horizon, they saw the blink of a light.

Soon, the light blinked on again. It continued coming on and off at regular intervals of about a few dozen seconds.

"What about tea?"

"Once we get inside."

Kino turned on the ignition again.

As they approached the country, they could see a large lighthouse looming from behind the walls. It was a tower of white, reaching to the skies from behind the grey--now black--walls. The light was rotating towards the ocean.

The country was by the sea, and its walls reached even into the waters.

Kino stopped Hermes by the gate made of logs, and walked over to the wooden outpost beside it. She lowered her bandanna and sighed. Her breath was white.

No one came out to greet her, so she knocked on the door. She could soon hear movements from inside.

A man who looked to be the gatekeeper appeared from behind the glass window.

"..."

Looking at him, Kino frowned slightly.

The man, who looked to be in his mid-thirties, was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. His T-shirt had a wide mouth, and his shorts were made of light cotton. On his feet were a pair of rubber sandals. He was not wearing any socks.

His skin was a tanned brown, but his attire looked nothing short of out of place for the climate.

"Oh, a traveler? Welcome to our country..."

As if proving the inadequacy of his clothing, the man's somewhat weak voice was clearly congested.

Kino registered for a three-day stay and received her permit with little trouble. Even as she filled out the forms the gatekeeper shivered and coughed several times.

Kino returned to Hermes, and the gate opened before their eyes.

They rode through the central area.

The country was quite small. Just behind its walls were orchards and fields, and large trees that could not be found outside the country.

There were no cars on the streets. Carriages, either horse- or ox-driven, were left on the streets with nothing to pull them.

In the central residential area were clusters of wooden houses. There was no glass in the window frames--only sunshades that offered no protection against the wind.

"Kino, what did the people from the last country say about this place again?"

"They called it 'A free-spirited tropical country'."

"I guess that's mostly true, except there's no sunlight here at all." Hermes said. The sky was pitch-black and the wind was bone-chilling.

There was no one to be seen outside. They had not spotted anyone since they first stepped in through the gate. No one was passing through the streets, though people occasionally peeked out their windows when they heard Hermes passing by.

"It's understandable that they wouldn't want to come outside in this weather." Kino said, heading towards the harbor area on the shore ahead of them.

In the harbor were piers and levees made of stone. Several ships were moored along them, their masts reaching into the sky.

A group of about twenty hardy men were huddled by the breakwater. They were likely fishermen, all sitting in a circle with their backs to one another.

And just like the man who had greeted Kino and Hermes at the gate, every last one of them were wearing T-shirts, shorts, and sandals.

"They must be freezing." Hermes said, "it doesn't make sense for anyone to be dressed like that in this weather." He added.

As Kino and Hermes got closer, the men glanced at them with empty eyes. There was a flash of envy in their expressions as they looked at Kino's coat.

Kino stopped Hermes. The men all looked away, then hurried away together as if fleeing.

"It doesn't look like they like you very much, Kino."

"..."

Kino rode away.

Kino and Hermes made their way towards the central area.

Square, white, one-story buildings lined the wide, paved streets. Their windows were devoid of glass, only sunshades let down over them.

As they passed by one building in particular--

"Hey, Kino. I see people."

They saw a lineup formed outside it. There was no sign on the building, so they had no idea what the lineup was for. The people spilling out of the front doors sat in two unending lines on the dirt paths.

There were men, women, children, and elders. Over a hundred of them were in the queue, which reached past the corner of the building and out of sight.

They were all dressed in T-shirts and shorts. They clung to one another as tightly as humanly possible, shivering in the cold.

When they noticed Kino and Hermes, they looked up in surprise. There was a flash of envy in their expressions as they looked at Kino's winter attire.

When Kino met their eyes, they looked away.

"It doesn't look like they like you very much, Kino." Hermes whispered.

At that moment, the people lined up on the ground suddenly began whispering. They simultaneously got to their feet and looked at one another as they murmured.

Kino looked into the direction towards which the people were looking at, to her left.

An ox-drawn carriage was coming down the middle of the street. Four oxen were slowly pulling along the rather large and gaudy carriage.

Kino parked Hermes by a building along the street. Some people glanced over at Kino as she got closer, but most of the citizens were focused on the carriage.

People began whispering.

"The Prime Minister..."

"It's the Premier."

"The Prime Minister's carriage."

The whispers also reached Kino and Hermes' ears.

"I get it."

"Some sort of authority here, huh?"

They whispered to one another.

Soon, as the shivering people in light clothing, the heavily dressed Kino, and Hermes watched, the carriage came to a stop before the building entrance.

The luxurious carriage door opened, and first stepped out two large men who looked to be bodyguards. They were both wearing T-shirts and shorts.

Following after them was a somewhat harsh-looking woman in her mid-forties, also dressed in a T-shirt and shorts.

Under the eyes of many of her citizens, the woman quickly walked into the building, watched over by her guards.

A sigh escaped the lips of the many people lined up outside. The crowds soon returned to their huddles, sitting back down on the ground.

Kino propped up Hermes on his side stand and politely introduced herself to a nearby citizen.

"..."

However, the person ignored Kino and looked away.

After several repetitions of asking and being ignored, Kino returned to Hermes. But the moment she pushed up Hermes' side stand, someone called out to her from behind.

"Ask the Prime Minister."

It was a man's voice. When Kino looked around, no one came forward. Everyone continued to avert their eyes.

"Thank you. I'll do that."

Kino did not seek out the owner of the voice. She did not ask Hermes. Thanking the anonymous informant, Kino pushed Hermes up to the carriage and stood before the bodyguard who was glancing over her way every once in a while.

Soon, the other bodyguards and the female Prime Minister stepped out of the building.

Seeing them out to the doors were several men wearing white T-shirts, white shorts, white hats, and white masks.

"I see. So this was a hospital." Hermes whispered.

As she left the hospital, the Prime Minister took notice of Kino and greeted her kindly.

"Oh my, travelers, I take it?"

As the bodyguards watched vigilantly, the Prime Minister approached Kino.

"Hello. Welcome to our country. I had heard that we have just welcomed our first visitor in a long time. I am the Prime Minister of this country."

"It's an honor. My name is Kino, and this here is my partner Hermes."

"Hello."

"Well, if you'll excuse me. Please take some time to look around." The Prime Minister said, trying to end the conversation.

"I'd like to ask you something." Kino said quickly, before the Prime Minister had turned away completely. She waited for the Prime Minister's reply ("What is it?") before continuing.

"On our way here, we noticed that the climate was getting worse and worse. Has the weather been this way here for long?"

"Yes. It's been several weeks now."

"It looks to be much colder than usual here. From the looks of the citizens, I can imagine they must be freezing by now."

The scary-looking bodyguard raised an eyebrow at Kino's statement. The Prime Minister, though calm, spoke with a slight edge to her voice.

"That's right. It may seem that way to you, traveler, with all the layers you're wearing. I'm sure our clothing may seem rather sloppy to you, but in our country, this is formalwear."

"I see. So that must be why everyone is dressed this way." Kino said understandingly. The Prime Minister smiled almost condescendingly.

"That is correct. From the beginning, the people of this country have always worn short-sleeved shirts and trousers. After all, that is easiest for a hot country like ours. I've heard before that in some countries, people wear long-sleeved shirts, neckties, and even jackets on top of it as formalwear. Even in the middle of summer! I'm quite glad that I wasn't born in such a foolish and illogical country."

"Could I ask you one more thing?"

"What is it?"

"What happens if a citizen were to dress otherwise?"

"Naturally, that is a violation of our laws. It's a serious crime. Of course, no other types of clothing exist in our country to begin with."

The carriage left the hospital and its lineup. The motorrad departed immediately, headed in a straight line for the northern gate.

"Oh? Your permit hasn't expired yet..." The gatekeeper said in his nasally voice.

"I _____ my _____. " Making up an excuse, Kino left the country.

With a bandanna over her face, the hat snug on her head, and her coat secure around her.

"Only half a day in a country, huh? That must be a new record, Kino."

"I feel cold just looking at those people. And besides, this country--"

Kino and Hermes departed down the path laid between the darkened seas and the plains.

Approximately two hundred and several days later.

A buggy was moving south, along the path by which Kino and Hermes had gone north.

The sky was as dark as night. With headlights on, the buggy, with its piles of luggage, carefully moved forward.

To the left of the road was the sea, and to its right was what used to be a verdant plain--now replaced with a dark and desolate wasteland.

"This is terrible. Looks like all the vegetation's died out." The man behind the wheel, sitting on the left side, muttered.

The man was wearing a parka with a hood pulled over his head. There were goggles over his eyes, and a muffler was wrapped around his face, hiding his expression.

In the passenger seat was a little girl bundled up in thick winter clothing. She was wearing a fur hat, and a muffler was wrapped around her body. Because she was not wearing goggles, her green eyes and white hair peeked out through the layers.

Sitting between her knees was a large dog with long white fur.

The dog spoke to the driver.

"This climate will last as long as the eruption and the prevailing westerlies continue. And even when the eruption stops..."

"This area won't recover anytime soon, am I right?" The man answered.

"..."

At that moment, the girl looked up without a word.

Tiny white particles danced in the air before her eyes. One of them flew past the hood of the buggy and landed on her cheek. It quickly melted and disappeared.

"And now they're even getting snow..." The man muttered sadly.

The snowflakes fluttered from the sky, slowly growing in number. They began to sparkle in the buggy's headlights.

The man slowed down the buggy slightly and looked at the girl in the passenger seat.

"Are you feeling cold at all, Ti?"

"..."

The girl quietly embraced the large fluffy dog's head and rubbed her cheek against him.

"Mm."

"I see. Just tell me if you are." The man said, his eyes narrowed.

The buggy continued along the thick grey path covered in snow.

The chains wrapped around the rear wheels dug up the snow in their path.

Snow continued falling from the pitch-black sky. Slowly but surely, the snow came down in larger amounts.

And--

"..."

The girl in the passenger seat, still hugging the dog, sometimes pointed out objects on either side of the road, or on the road itself.

"..."

The man also glanced at the objects. If one was on the road in their way, he turned the steering wheel to avoid running over it.

They were little mounds covered in snow. Many of them were piled up over the flat lands.

The little mounds were, at one point, creatures living as humans. They were the corpses of people who had collapsed on the road, carrying a scant few belongings with them.

"I see little hope here, Master Shizu." The dog said, his head still in the girl's embrace.

"You may be right. But we should at least go all the way to the country. We'll be there very soon. We have to get a good look at the situation before making our report."

The moment the man finished, they saw a black wall looming ahead of them in the darkness,

On top of the wall was a lighthouse. There was no light.

The wooden gate was left wide open.

The buggy slowly entered the country without receiving permission.

The landscape inside the walls was little different from the world outside.

Everything was grey. Every plant was wilted, and every tree had been cut down. Lonely stumps lined either side of the road.

"They must have used them for firewood..." The man said.

After a look around the country, they headed for the harbor. Not a single ship was moored at the docks. All they found was the remains of some lumber, cut into pieces and piled up neatly.

In the central area they began to discover corpses on either side of the road.

The corpses were no longer human in shape. Skulls and bones from arms and legs were rolling around in the snow.

The man drove slowly. He stopped the buggy at the centre of the town and loudly blew on a whistle. He turned off the engine and listened carefully, but he heard nothing.

"Another country gone." He whispered sadly, snow falling upon him.

The little girl and the dog looked to the man.

The man took off his goggles, undid the muffler around his face, and looked directly at the girl.

"Ti, the people of this country couldn't bring themselves to change."

"..."

The girl said nothing. She stared into the man's eyes, waiting for him to continue."

"They lived by excuses like 'Things have always been this way, and that was good enough for us'. They could never accept anything but the thin clothes they always wore. Even though the world around them had changed completely, they couldn't adjust to the changes. It's difficult to put it simply, but..."

"They lived by their own justice?"

The girl said suddenly, a rather long sentence in comparison to her usual silence.

"..."

"..."

The man and the dog went silent.

Several seconds later, in the middle of the snowy street, the man looked back at the girl's green eyes.

"Yes. You're right. These people lived and died by their own justice."

The man started the buggy again. They began to leave.

They left through the north gate, which they had passed on their way through the empty country.

There they spotted life.

"..."

The man stopped the buggy in front of the living creatures.

In the world of grey were animals also of the same colour. A pack of about twenty wolves were feasting on the corpse of a human in the snow.

The wolves took notice of the buggy and looked up simultaneously. They glared at the mysterious metal object that shone light on them, and the two people and dog riding atop it.

"I see... So the corpses inside the country were all eaten by the wolves." The man concluded.

"Wolves do not normally live in tropical regions like this." The dog said. The man nodded.

"They must have followed the climate all the way here. This is courage. In the end, these wolves won out with their strength."

The wolves began to growl at them. They put their meal on hold and slowly approached the buggy, encircling it.

"Although that doesn't mean we'll be offering ourselves up to them." The man said jokingly. The girl turned round and reached into the back of the buggy. When she turned back to face the front, she was holding a hand grenade, taped closed to prevent it from exploding.

"..."

She looked up at him silently.

"Don't worry. We won't need it." The man laughed.

He shifted gears and started the buggy.

The buggy drove past the surprised wolves and left in the blink of an eye. It was soon swallowed up by the darkness.



第二話

「悪魔が来た国」

—Talk of the Devil.—

Chapter 2 - A Land Visited by a Devil

~Talk of the Devil~

One more tale before you go off to dreamland, child?

All right, let me tell you a story I've never told anyone before.

It's a strange, terrifying, old story.

Don't worry, now. It may be a little scary, but no one gets hurt or goes to sleep forever.
Now, listen carefully.

When I was young, I met a devil. Only once.

That's right, child. This land is the only place in the world where people live. People can't survive anywhere outside.

That's why we must stay in this country. After all, the outside world is an inhospitable place.

We can only live here in the forest, surrounded by trees. People can't leave this place.

Living in this land is the only way of life we have.

I was only twelve years old when the devil visited us.

One of the hunters told us that a young person came from beyond the forest, riding on a strange creature. The entire country was in an uproar! After all, no one could possibly have come from the outside.

Everyone thought that the hunter was just imagining things after seeing an animal.

But that 'person' soon came up to the town square, riding a strange shiny creature that kept roaring and huffing.

That 'person' politely said "Hello" to us. It introduced itself as 'Kino', and its mount as 'Hermes'. That creature could also speak in our language, like a parrot.

We all thought that we might have been dreaming. Everyone was too surprised to think of what to do.

After all, it looked human enough, but there was no way anything could survive outside our lands.

And what could we ever make of the shiny creature that could speak to us?

That was when one man stepped up.

"I will go speak to it."

It was the chief of the southern district. He went forward towards these newcomers.

What a brave man! He truly was someone to be respected.

The chief bravely greeted them and said, "Would you perhaps join us for some food?" It was just about lunchtime, you see.

That's when the 'person' said,

"Thank you. I was just getting hungry, you see. I'm very grateful."

With that, it took a seat beside the chief in the town square.

The rest of us watched them from afar. Of course, we couldn't leave the chief behind. So we stayed just close enough that we could hear them talking.

The chief's wife also bravely brought food to them. Fresh baked bread, fruits, and vegetables.

The 'person' and the chief sat side-by-side, eating together for some time. The chief talked about things like the weather, constantly waiting for a chance to ask one question in particular.

What question did he want to ask? He wanted to know who or what this 'person' was, and how it had come all this way from the outside world, where nothing can survive.

But before he could get that chance, something terrifying happened.

You see, the chief's wife, who brought them tea, was wearing a small sack of butter around her waist. That's right. The same old butter people use every day. A little sack of fragrant butter, no different than the way we make them now.

The 'person' noticed that wonderful smell when the chief's wife passed by.

"Is that butter? It smells wonderful." It said to her. The chief's wife was flabbergasted, but she bravely answered it. But anyone could tell she must have been scared enough to scream and run at that point.

"Thank you. It's a special butter I made myself."

She then added,

"Would you like to try it?"

That 'person' replied,

"I would be grateful if you could spare some."

The chief asked his wife to scoop some of the butter into a small bowl. And that's exactly what she did. Then she held it out to the 'person'.

That's when it happened.

The chief, his wife, and everyone else in town watched the whole thing!

It took the fork it was eating vegetables with, and used it to spread the butter over its bread!

Could you believe it?

Spreading butter on bread!

Everyone was too surprised to say anything.

The chief was right there, watching from up close. His eyes were so wide I thought they'd pop out of his head. His wife looked like she was just about to faint there and then.

And then, that 'person'...

Took a big bite out of that piece of bread!

It gobbled it up, butter and all!

That's when the chief, his wife, and everyone else figured it out.

This 'person' was actually a devil!

It wasn't human!

It had to be a devil!

No one would put cosmetic on bread and eat it so happily!

They always said, 'Devils are creatures that appear human, but behave differently'.

That's right. We were serving lunch to a devil.

But once we realized the truth, we were relieved. After all, there was nothing strange about a devil coming from outside the country. That explained everything. It was daytime, which also means there was nothing strange that the devil looked just like a human.

Once he figured it out, the chief calmed down.

"I'm glad to see you're enjoying your meal. Would you care for seconds? We have plenty more bread and butter!"

The devil that called itself Kino said,

"It's delicious. Thank you very much for the food."

The devil kept eating bread with butter until it finished the chief's wife's entire supply.

We were all very excited, watching the devil eat lunch. The chief got a little closer to it, and asked things like,

"Where do you hail from?"

Or,

"What is that large, loud, shiny creature?"

Or,

"How does it speak so well?"

The devil answered,

"I'm coming from a place very far to the east. I'm on a journey, you see."

"Hermes here is... He's my partner. We're traveling together."

"He's a bit of a chatterbox."

It politely answered all the chief's questions.

That day, we had made friends with this devil. However, there was one thing.

"I would like to stay here for the next three days. Would that be all right?"

We had no choice but to turn down that particular request. After all, we knew well that devils transform into bats and moles at night to attack humans and turn them into trees.

The chief firmly turned down its request.

"I see. That is unfortunate."

Maybe it was satisfied by all that butter. The devil backed down easily.

Then, it got back on that strange creature and left the country, beyond the forest.

Don't believe me, child?

I'm not surprised, but I promise you, it's all true. Every last word. I heard the devil's voice with my own ears.

After that, the chief of the southern district told us that it would be best if we never told anyone this story. After all, nothing good would come out of letting people know that we had been visited by a devil. The chief kept it a secret from the High Elder until the very end.

There aren't many people now who know this story.

I am old now, too.

And that is exactly why I wanted to tell you this story.

You don't have to believe me, child. But this is the truth.

I once met a devil.

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"Hey, the old man next door's talking to that old wooden doll again. I wonder what he's saying?"

"Who knows? Let's leave the poor man be. I'm sure he's happy in his own little world."



Chapter 3 - Land of Investigation
~Common Sense~

It was a certain day at a certain time.

A battered yellow car arrived at a certain country.

On the car were two humans. One was a woman of ambiguous age who sported long black hair. Over her right thigh was a high-caliber revolver. The other human was a slightly short but handsome man. Holstered at his side was a .22 caliber automatic hand persuader.

When they entered the country proper and stepped into the city square at the very centre of the nation, they saw that a public execution was in progress.

A great many people were gathered in the square. And at the centre of it all was a line of about a dozen scaffolds--gallows.

From the gallows were hung very sturdy pieces of rope. They were tied in loops, which were hung around the necks of the people sitting with their hands tied behind their backs.

There were all sorts of people, from young women to elderly men. Dozens of men and women of all ages were sitting in a row.

Beside each scaffold was a large wheel made to be turned by hand. It was a mechanism that would raise the ropes by several millimeters each time it was turned.

"Help us", "We're sorry", "Forgive us", the people on the gallows pleaded weakly.

"Shut up", "Die", "We'll never forgive you", the crowd chanted, swallowing their hopes.

Beside each wheel was a lineup of many of the people who were gathered at the square.

"My, a pair of travelers! Welcome to our country." A local said, noticing the man and the woman.

"Thank you. May I ask what all this commotion is about?" The man asked.

"As you can see, we're holding a public execution. Until very recently, those people sitting there on the verge of death were our politicians, critics, and civilian activists."

"So why the execution?"

"They called themselves pacifists, claiming that war was evil and calling for the abolishing of our military. For a very long time, they stubbornly worked to disarm our country."

"Ah, I understand." The man said immediately.

"Of course." The woman agreed in understanding.

"Uh... I haven't quite finished..." The citizen trailed off, astonished. The woman spoke.

"Those people you're executing now had been bribed by a neighboring country, correct? The other country wanted to conquer yours, and so tried to weaken your armed forces. So these people operated under the pretense of pacifism in order to disarm your country."

The man continued where the woman left off.

"There is nothing as sacred as peace', 'War is the source of all evil', 'Soldiers are murderers', 'Use the military's budget to instead feed the poor', 'Let us abandon our weapons and solve our conflicts peacefully with words'... All great things to hear, to be sure. But could it be that your innocent citizens were enticed by those words and agreed with them, saying 'War really is evil. Let's get rid of our military'? I think I understand."

"You're absolutely right... How did you know?" The citizen gasped. The man replied easily.

"How'? When it comes to deceiving neighboring countries, this is one of the oldest tricks in the book. It's a bit old-fashioned, but rather effective. Many countries have fallen for this kind of trap--they were conquered the moment they disarmed themselves. It seems like yours just dodged a particularly dangerous bullet."

"That's correct... Our country found evidence of their dealings and arrested them. At the trials, they were sentenced to death. The execution is in progress as we speak. We had to hurry to build these machines from ancient blueprints, you see, in order to allow everyone to participate. We're in the process of turning the wheels little by little, but we'll stop once they're up to the most excruciating point--when they're only half-standing. In this heat, I'm sure they'll be dead within three days."

"That's a rather drawn-out execution."

"Only the slowest and most painful death for these traitors. They tried to sell their country and leave their people to be enslaved. We'd kill them over and over again, if only we could."

As the two travelers went to sell unnecessary possessions and buy supplies--

"Just kill me now! Please!"

"Shut your trap."

"Please... Help me..."

"Hey, hey! Don't tighten that one any more, okay? We don't want to kill them that quickly."

Screams continued to echo through the square.

"How about this pot, Master? We needed a new one, anyway."

"By all means, if you're willing to cook."

"...Oh, all right."

The two travelers paid the screaming no mind as they went about their business at a nearby shop.

"I hope you had a wonderful time. Please come visit us again, travelers."

A guard sent off the two travelers with a smile.

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It was a certain day at a certain time.

A buggy arrived at a certain country.

It was carrying two humans and a dog. One of the humans was a black-haired young man wearing a green sweater. At his left side was a sword. The other human was a little girl. Beside her was a grenade launcher. The dog was large, with long fluffy white fur and a face that made it look like it was always smiling.

When they entered the country proper and stepped into the city square at the very centre of the nation, they saw that a public execution was in progress.

A great many soldiers were gathered in the square. And in front of them was a line of people sitting on the ground.

The soldiers were carrying military-issue persuaders. Their barrels were pointed squarely at the chests of the people sitting on the ground with their hands tied together.

There were all sorts of people, from young women to elderly men. Dozens of men and women of all ages were sitting in a row.

On each of the military-issue persuaders was a trigger. It was used to start the firing mechanism. One pull, and a bullet would be launched from the barrel at three times the speed of sound.

"What is the meaning of this", "You traitors", "Help me", the people sitting on the other end of the barrel pleaded weakly.

"Why don't you ask your own conscience?", "It's for the greater good", "It's the obvious thing to do", the soldiers replied calmly.

"My, a pair of travelers and a dog! Welcome to our country." Someone said, noticing the buggy.

"Thank you. May I ask what all this commotion is about?" The young man asked.

"As you can see, we're holding a public execution. Until very recently, those people sitting there on the verge of death were politicians, critics, and civilian activists."

"So why the execution?"

"They called themselves pacifists, claiming that war was evil and calling for the abolishing of the military. For a very long time, they stubbornly worked to disarm this country."

"Ah, I understand." The man said immediately.

"Of course." The dog agreed in understanding.

"Uh... I haven't quite finished..." The soldier trailed off, astonished. The young man spoke.

"Those people you're executing now had been bribed by your country--the conquerors--correct? Your country wanted to conquer this nation, and so tried to weaken their armed forces. So these people operated under the pretense of pacifism in order to disarm this country."

The dog continued where the young man left off.

"There is nothing as sacred as peace', 'War is the source of all evil', 'Soldiers are murderers', 'Use the military's budget to instead feed the poor', 'Let us abandon our weapons and solve our conflicts peacefully with words'... All great things to hear, to be sure. But could it be that innocent citizens were enticed by those words and agreed with them, saying 'War really is evil. Let's get rid of our military'?"

"You're absolutely right... How did you know?" The man gasped. The young man replied easily.

"How', you ask? When it comes to deceiving neighboring countries, this is one of the oldest tricks in the book. It's a bit old-fashioned, but rather effective. Many countries have fallen for this kind of trap--they were conquered the moment they disarmed themselves."

"That is correct. Last week, our nation conquered this country. Our plan had worked, and they had only just disarmed themselves. It was quite simple to take over, and we were relieved that there were no casualties on either side. From this point on, this country's riches and food will be brought to our land. The citizens will be enslaved. And as for those people you see on the ground... They are filthy traitors who were enticed to sell off their own country. We cannot allow such untrustworthy people to live under our command. To that end, we are taking care of them because their role is complete."

"I see."

"Let's move on to the next country." The young man said.

As the two humans and the dog turned away to sell unnecessary possessions and buy supplies--

"How could you?! We did everything in our power to help you!"

"Soldiers! Load your persuaders!"

"Please... please, spare us!"

"Aim!"

"You liars!"

Screams and orders echoed from the square in turn.

"You're the only liars I see around here. Fire!"

After a sharp burst of gunfire, the square became very quiet.

The two travelers and the dog finished their business in the country.

"I hope you had a wonderful time. Please come visit us again, travelers."

The newly assigned guard sent them off with a smile.

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It was a certain day at a certain time.

A motorrad laden with traveling gear arrived at a certain country.

On the motorrad was a young human with short black hair. Over the traveler's right thigh was a high-caliber revolver. A .22 caliber automatic hand persuader was strapped horizontally behind the traveler's back.

When they entered the country proper and stepped into the city square at the very centre of the nation, they saw that a public address was in progress.

A great many people were gathered in the square. And at the centre of it all was about a dozen speakers waiting their turn.

In front of the podium was a banner reading, "War is evil! There is no excuse for crime!".

There were all sorts of people, from young women to elderly men. Dozens of men and women of all ages were sitting in a row.

"My, a traveler! Welcome to our country." A local said, noticing the traveler and the motorrad.

"Thank you. May I ask what all this commotion is about?" The traveler asked.

"As you can see, we're holding a public address. Those people sitting there are our politicians, critics, and civilian activists."

"And?"

"They call themselves pacifists, claiming that war was evil and calling for the abolishing of our military. For a long time, they have been stubbornly working to disarm our country."

"Oh, I understand." The motorrad said immediately.

"Of course." The traveler agreed in understanding.

"Uh... I haven't quite finished..." The citizen trailed off, astonished.

"Never mind, I apologize. I was talking to myself. thank you for the information." The traveler said, then walked away from the confused citizen.

The motorrad spoke to the traveler.

"Those people up there were probably bribed by a neighboring country. The other country wanted to conquer this one, so they're trying to weaken their armed forces. So these people are saying they're pacifists in order to disarm this country."

The traveler continued where the motorrad left off.

"There is nothing as sacred as peace', 'War is the source of all evil', 'Soldiers are murderers', 'Use the military's budget to instead feed the poor', 'Let us abandon our weapons and solve our conflicts peacefully with words'... All great things to hear, sure. But the naive citizens might be enticed by those words and agree with them, saying 'War really is evil. Let's get rid of our military'. Just like I heard from Master."

"It's one of the oldest tricks in the book to deceive neighboring countries. It's a bit cold-fashioned, but..."

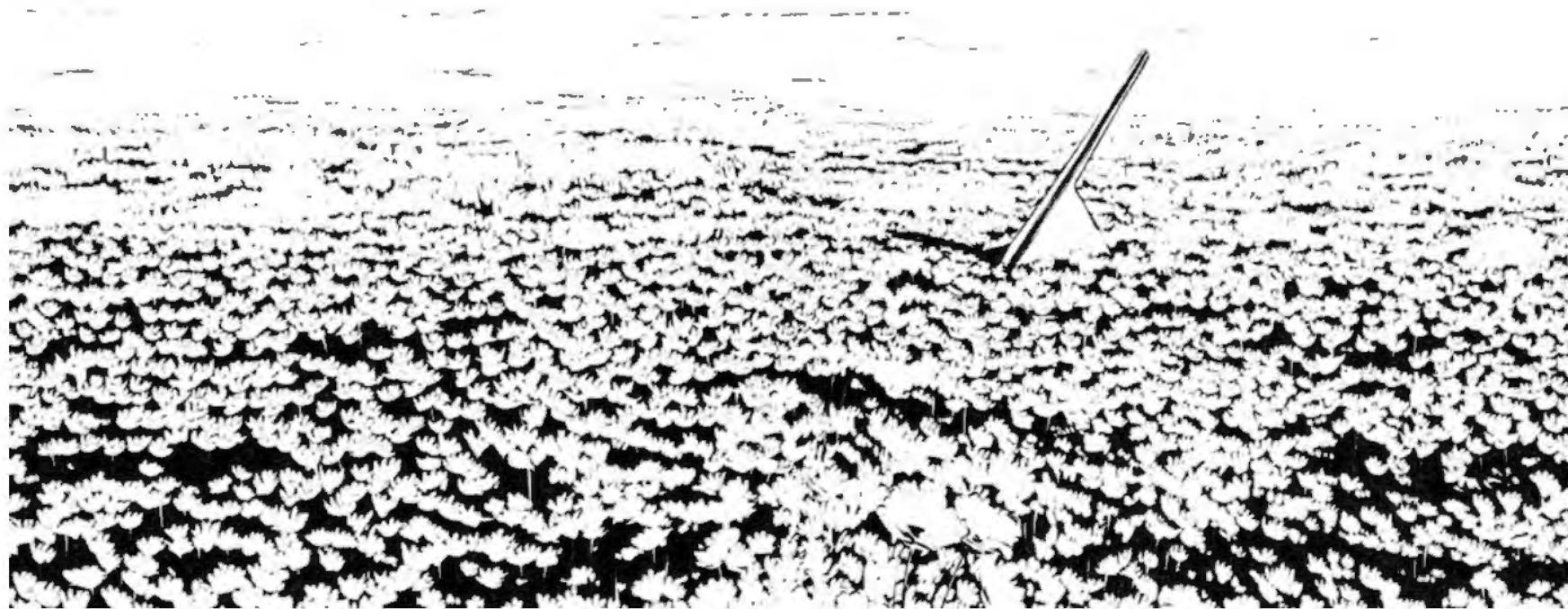
"You mean, 'old-fashioned', right?"

"Right! That's what I meant to say. It's a bit old-fashioned, but effective. Lots of countries were conquered like this, being attacked as soon as they disarmed themselves. I wonder what's going to happen to this one?" The motorrad asked.

"That doesn't really concern me. Anyway, I wonder where I can find that delicious 'deep-fried shrimp' everyone's talking about? I'd like to give it a try before I leave..."

第四話

「日時計の国」
— Counter Strike —



Chapter 4 - Land with a Sundial

~Counter Strike~

It was springtime. A lone motorrad was making its way through the mountains.

On either side of the road were forested hills, standing one behind another. They stretched as far as the eye could see, beautiful green curves against the blue daytime sky.

Branches were slowly beginning to overgrow with green with the coming season. They cast still bony shadows upon the narrow mountain road they covered.

The motorrad, laden with traveling gear atop and on either side of its back wheel, slowly made its way forward, scattering light and shadow in its trail.

The rider was a young human in her mid teens. She was wearing a black jacket, a hat with flaps over the ears, and a worn, silver-rimmed pair of goggles.

Around her waist was a thick belt, and over her right thigh was a hand persuader. Inside the leather holster was a high-caliber revolver.

The motorrad crawled up the firm dirt roads and spoke to his rider.

"That's right. It's important not to go too fast on the mountains. If we happen to make just one bad turn, we might go flying right off a cliff. We were really lucky just now."

"I'm sorry." The rider apologized, embarrassed.

"Anyway, Kino, about the country we're going to... Does it really exist?"

The rider called Kino, looked straight ahead and answered, slightly confused.

"What are you saying, Hermes? We're climbing this mountain to get there because it exists."

"I guess I'm trying to say I don't know if the country they told us about could really exist." The motorrad called Hermes replied.

"I get it."

Kino nodded, and slowed Hermes down even more. They edged past a left turn bordering a steep downward slope, then sped up again. The uphill road continued to twist up the mountain for some distance.

"A land with a sundial, huh?" Kino mumbled. "It's still pretty unbelievable. I can't imagine how an entire country would be one gigantic clock."

"Maybe we've been had?" Hermes asked. Kino did not look concerned.

"That doesn't matter. We'll visit either way, and if the rumors weren't true..."

"What then?"

"Then it'll be time for some good food!" Kino answered immediately.

"I knew it." Hermes muttered.

They rode through several mountains. The sun was now set lower than the brim of Kino's hat.

Kino and Hermes rode all the way to the top of a long incline and stood upon a crest--the peak of the mountain.

"Wow."

"Wow."

They looked down at the country and let out a simultaneous cry of astonishment.

Kino stopped Hermes and shut off the engine. She took off her goggles so that she could get a good look at the sight before them.

On the other side of the ridge was a vast hollow filled with lush green trees. Their destination was at the centre of it all.

Like most countries, this land was encircled by walls. The sheer size of the hollow made it look rather small in comparison, but up close, the size of the enclosure was enormous. Though humans probably could not climb these walls without a great deal of effort, from afar they looked like tiny bricks around a small garden.

In the middle of the country was a circular dome. It looked rather like a large switch situated at the centre of the country.

And jutting out from that dome was a long, thin, triangular structure that pointed northward.

It was angled at about forty degrees from the ground. The long thin shape made it look rather like a measure. It was white, and there were no decorations or designs upon its surface. The tip of the triangle was jutting out slightly from the country's walls.

From the size of the country, it was plain that the structure was on a different scale from mere buildings--it was the size of a small mountain.

The circular walls and the triangle looked uncannily like a sundial one might find at a park. A shadow was cast over the interior of the country by the setting sun.

"Kino, they were telling the truth."

"Yeah. It really does exist..."

"That's one big building. I bet thousands of people could live inside it. Though there aren't any windows."

"What is it for...? Is it really a sundial?"

"Why not? It's angled in line with the latitudes."

"I really want to see it up close. And I'd be even happier if I could get an explanation." Kino said, putting on her goggles again and starting the engine.

It was a long ride from the mountain to the country.

Kino and Hermes made their way to the bottom of the hollow and began riding through a flat patch of forest. The great white triangle began to loom over them more and more from beyond the branches that canopied over the road.

By the time the sky was dyed red by the dusk, Kino and Hermes had finally arrived at the easter gate. They could no longer see the great triangle, which was hidden behind the high walls.

Kino stopped Hermes and greeted the guard who came out of the checkpoint.

The guard, who was holding a rifle, carefully looked over Kino and Hermes, then searched their belongings.

He made sure that Kino was not carrying enough explosives to level a building, wireless communication devices, or visual recorders, and spoke.

"We will grant you permission for a three-day stay. However, as long as you are in our country, you must be accompanied by our guide and do as they say."

Kino agreed to the terms. She was granted entry to the country.

The gates opened, and the guard accompanied Kino and Hermes inside.

Directly inside were fields used for farming. They were desolate, not a single thing growing from the soil.

Beyond the fields were houses. Beyond the houses were large buildings. And beyond the buildings was a gigantic triangle, which was blocking out most of the sky to their right. The sun was setting behind it.

"So is it really a sundial?" Kino wondered.

That was when a small rusted truck that had seen too much use drove up and stopped in front of them.

A young woman in a business suit disembarked. She greeted the guard and addressed Kino and Hermes. She introduced herself as their guide around the country. The woman wore glasses, her beautiful features locked in an expression as cold as ice.

Kino greeted her back.

"I will lead you to your quarters. Please load the motorrad onto the back of the truck. We must hurry--the sun is already setting. You must have a lot of questions, but please wait until tomorrow morning." The woman said mechanically.

Kino nodded, and pushed Hermes onto the truck via a folding ramp. She secured him tightly with a length of rope so he would not topple over.

Kino sat on the passenger seat on the left side of the truck as they drove into the country on smooth paved roads. As its exterior made clear, the truck itself was old and uncomfortable. But there was a large monitor attached beside the driver's seat.

The guide said nothing all throughout the drive. Kino also kept quiet.

By the time the sun set and darkness began creeping into the sky, Kino and Hermes arrived at a hotel on the corner of a large street lined with buildings. the great triangle was sticking out of the ground to their west.

"I will return tomorrow morning. There is a curfew in effect, and so you are forbidden from leaving the hotel form this point forth. We will not be responsible if you step outside and are arrested. I'm afraid we cannot provide you with dinner due to the time. If you'll excuse me." The guide explained coldly, and left.

The hotel room was large, but plain. It was furnished with only the bare essentials. Kino unloaded the luggage from Hermes.

She chewed down her portable rations, which had the consistency of drying clay, and spoke with Hermes.

"Did you notice, Kino? All the houses and buildings here are basically mass-produced copies."

"Yeah. It felt like we were going through a full-sized model, or a looping street. Except for that." Kino said, looking towards the shut curtains.

"They didn't put a lot of effort into the buildings in this country. Except for that." Hermes said.

"We'll have to ask about it tomorrow. I think I'll just go to sleep for today. Good night."

Finishing her dinner, Kino lay down on the cheap bed framed in iron piping and fell asleep.

"You know, Kino, they say going to sleep right after you eat turns you into a bug." Hermes advised, but Kino did not answer.

As her quiet breathing filled the room--

"That's exactly what I'm talking about!" Hermes said to himself.

The next day, Kino woke up at sunrise.

After doing some light warm-ups in her large room, she practiced shooting with her revolver [Cannon]. She then took it apart to clean it.

The water in the shower was lukewarm. Kino was a bit disappointed, but washed herself anyway.

Kino opened the curtains. At that very moment, the sun rose over the hills and shone upon the great white structure. The light reflecting off it instantly illuminated the room.

"It's so bright, Kino."

"It is. But it's not too bad. It spared me the trouble of trying to wake you up."

"I wonder what that is."

"Me too. I'm looking forward to finding out."

The bellboy brought Kino breakfast. Her meal consisted of a small, hard piece of bread, and a very watery bowl of soup. It was practically prison food.

"I'm terribly sorry, traveler, but please understand that we're not discriminating against you. Currently, all of our citizens are subsisting on these meals." The Bellboy apologized.

"I see. I noticed that the fields were in a rather unfortunate state. A bad harvest this year?"

"I'm afraid not. I can't tell you myself, so let me just say that it's all for a greater cause. Our guide will give you a clear explanation. I'm sure you'll be floored. Please look forward to it." the bellboy said, leaving the room.

"I guess this is edible." Kino said, eating her humble breakfast.

She was just about finished eating when someone knocked on her door again.

"Good morning, Miss Kino! Did you sleep well last night? Look! Today is going to be a wonderful day! Right this way!"

It was the ver same guide from yesterday, but on her face was a beautiful smile that made her look like a completely different person. The tone of her was bright and cheery.

"..."

Kino said nothing.

"Um, who are you?" Hermes asked.

Kino loaded Hermes onto the back of the guide's truck and climbed into the passenger seat.

The sky was a clear blue, but there was a strong wind blowing in from the west. Great grey clouds loomed overhead in that direction.

The guide started the old truck. There were no other vehicles on the streets that morning. In fact, there were no people walking on the streets at all.

"It's very quiet." Hermes said from behind the window that opened into the back of the truck.

"Yes, and I'll explain to you just why that is very shortly!" The smiling guide said cheerfully.

"Where will you be taking us?" Kino asked.

"I'm sure it's quite obvious to you. Right over there!" The guide answered. Kino looked ahead, towards the great white triangle glowing in the morning sun.

"Are you going to tell us about it?" Hermes asked from the back.

"Absolutely! The President has just granted us permission to disclose the truth! Now we can declare its purpose proudly. You're quite fortunate that you only arrived yesterday!"

"That's amazing. Clap clap clap." Hermes sounded out his applause.

"So what is that triangle?" Kino asked. The guide glanced at her.

"What do you think it is?" She asked proudly.

"The hand of a large sundial."

"I see... so it really does look that way to you? We've heard the same from other travelers who visited us in the past."

The guide visibly trembled with excitement at Kino and Hermes' answer.

"Ohhhhh...!" She shook, squeezing out her voice as though no longer unable to hold back her joy.

"?"

"?"

"So we haven't been found out yet! Excellent! This is marvelous!"

"Pardon?"

"What do you mean?"

"That large triangle is, in fact, *not* a sundial! We've actually been spreading misinformation among travelers and merchants visiting us, telling them 'This is a sundial used in a traditional ceremony in our country'! For fifty years, since we first began construction! It seems like our plan was a success! This is wonderful!"

"I see... So what was the reason for all this secrecy?"

"And what is that thing?"

"I'll get to that now! We're here."

The truck stopped at the southern part of the large dome at the centre of the country. A great many people were gathered at the city square, built in a semicircle around the dome. All kinds of people, from elders and young people to men and women were there, all dressed in ragged work clothes.

"No wonder the streets were empty. There must be tens of thousands of people here. Maybe even hundreds of thousands." Hermes said.

"That's right. The entire country has gathered here for this historic moment."

Security officials led the truck through the crowd. They stopped before the large podium and stage set up in the square.

Behind the stage, where a line of microphones were set up, was a broad street and a multitude of people. And behind them all was the great structure.

From the south, Kino and Hermes could see that the structure's width was surprisingly thin, much thinner than its side made it seem to be. Even still, it looked to be about as thick as most other buildings around it.

"Look! The inauguration ceremony's starting. Watch carefully!" The guide said, still sitting in the truck.

As Kino and Hermes watched from the passenger seat and truck bed respectively, the ceremony began. The band played a fanfare as the crowd cheered loudly enough to shake the ground. Soon, an elderly man in a suit stepped up to the podium.

"Here, you can see better this way." The guide said, turning on the monitor by the driver's seat. The screen crackled for a moment before blinking on to display the man at the podium. The Emcee spoke.

[Now, for the President's speech.]

The President quieted the crowd with a wave of his hands and began his speech.

[Everyone! This is a historic moment!] He began, and continued for a very long time. He spoke of the greatness of this country's people, the hard work undertaken by the citizens, and the great sacrifices they endured. The speech went very slowly thanks in part to the fact that the crowd cheered at the end of each of his sentences.

"I'm bored." Hermes said quietly, making sure he would go unnoticed by the guide, who would occasionally take off her glasses to wipe the tears from her eyes.

And finally--

[And now, for the moment you've all been waiting for! This is the fruit of our efforts! The key to our bright, shining future!]

An even louder rumble of cheers shook the air as the crowd turned away from the President, all looking in the same direction. Before their eyes was the great white triangle.

There was another rouse of fanfare, and a dramatic pounding of drums.

"We now officially reveal..."

"Ooh, what's going to happen?"

"..."

[Behold!] The President said, and the drum stopped.

The white triangle split open.

"..."

The triangle opened up like a set of curtains, before Kino's eyes. Great white outer walls came off the sides of the triangle, leaning east and west.

The object hidden behind the walls emerged into the sunlight.

Protected by the walls was a long, thin, cylinder. It stuck out of the dome diagonally, pointing at the sky. Though the shape made it seem otherwise, the cylinder was actually rather thick--about as wide as a two-lane tunnel. And just like the walls, it was white.

The cylinder had segments that jutted out from its form, looking rather like a bamboo stalk. At regular intervals there were short sections where the cylinder was about twice its regular thickness. There were about thirty of these segments in total.

Under the cylinder were dozens of thick pillars built provide steady support.

The outer walls that had been encasing the cylinder and the pillars silently tilted over. They cast their shadows over the buildings and houses underneath.

"Huh? What about the houses under the walls?" Hermes asked.

"They'll be crushed, most likely." The guide said nonchalantly. At that very instant, the two triangular walls fell over sideways and crushed the buildings underneath them in the blink of an eye.

There was a deafening roar, followed by a great tremor, followed by an even louder roar of cheers.

The great dust cloud produced by the impact covered them. soon, a powerful breeze carried the dust away towards the east.

"Is this all right? Many people must have lost their homes."

"Absolutely. I'll explain why soon."

As the crowd roared in excitement, Kino looked at the image displayed on the screen. She looked upon the profile of the mysterious cylinder and spoke to the guide.

"So this is what you were hiding..."

"Yes! Can you tell what it is?"

"..."

Kino looked at the cylinder, back at its image on the monitor, and thought for a moment.

The cylinder jutted into the sky at an angle, longer than the radius of the country.

"...I'm not sure." Kino surrendered.

"That's not surprising!" The guide beamed, and looked behind her at Hermes. "What about you, Hermes? I get the feeling you might know what it is."

"Actually, I just figured it out. But is it okay for me to tell Kino?"

"Absolutely!"

Kino looked at Hermes. Hermes revealed the answer.

"Kino, that's a cannon."

"A cannon? As in, it shoots projectiles into the distance? Are you sure, Hermes?"

"Hermes is absolutely right! This is our country's pride and joy, an ultra-large cannon! We've poured all of our resources into this weapon--the key to our bright future!"

The guide used the same metaphor as the President as she spoke as though giving a speech.

All around them, the crowd sang a song praising their country, overcome by emotion.

"Our country has been unfairly discriminated against." The guide said, the tears in her eyes hidden behind her glasses. The chorus of the crowds continued behind her.

"Is it because we are in the middle of nowhere? Other countries around us would not even look at our land. Even though we are the greatest country in the world, made up of the greatest people in the world, the rest of humanity refused to acknowledge us."

"Oh... of course."

"And? And?"

Kino and Hermes agreed with her idly, not asking what was so great about anything.

With the grand chorus serving as a background, the guide continued with a tone resembling a stage actor.

"And so, our country decided to exercise our right to avenge ourselves upon the world that refused to face us!"

"Oh... of course."

"And? And?"

"And in order to create a plan, we selected talented people from among us to scout out other countries. Many of them did not return--perhaps they were captured as spies. But! One group in particular managed to bring back magnificent data from the ruins of a country in the south! This was exactly fifty-one years ago!"

"And the result is that cannon?"

"That's right! They had brought back the plans for this ultra-large cannon! The plans said, 'This cannon can hit any point on this planet'. Isn't it a magnificent weapon? At the moment of its completion, the rest of the world will have no choice but to bow down before us!"

"So that's why you built this cannon?"

"Absolutely! It became a top-priority national project, taking precedence over everything else. Our people abandoned all leisure and entertainment, and worked as one for the country! It took a very long time--our grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, and mothers gave their entire lives for the country! Many people endured all kinds of pain. Houses were built with the bare minimum of necessities, and excess of any sort was outlawed. We ended up minimizing our agricultural sector so much that we went into a dire food shortage. Many people passed away of illness. Our average lifespan also went down. Even still, we persevered in the face of hardship!"

"That's why my meal was..."

"I get it."

"However! Now that the cannon is complete, that is no longer relevant! From now on, our country is free to do whatever it pleases! After all, we can demand everything we ever want from the world that looked its nose down at us so! The riches of the world will be brought to us! All we have to do is relax and give orders! And fools who try to resist will be faced with justice!"

The chorus ended just as the guide finished her speech.

As the crowds applauded, the President spoke from the podium.

[Everyone! I now reveal to you... the projectile!]

The crowd roared once again as ten trucks approached the square. They were so large that the truck that Kino and Hermes were on looked like toys. The ten trucks were driving side-by-side in a straight line, pulling behind them one large wagon.

On the wagon was the shell for the cannon. It was a black cylinder with a pointed end, shaped no differently from its brethren. But its size was enormous. It almost looked as though the trucks were transporting a lighthouse.

The shell soon passed by Kino and Hermes, followed by its shadow.

"That's huge!" Hermes cried.

"How will you launch something so large? If the shell is too heavy, there won't be enough force generated to propel it all the way. Even my persuader has such a limit." Kino said, pointing at [Cannon] holstered over her right thigh. The guide grinned.

"There's no such worries here. After all, we followed the plans to the letter. I'm sure you're worried that your homeland might be destroyed, but perhaps you should pray that your country wisely decides to obey us." She said condescendingly.

"Even a shell that big won't be a problem for that cannon, Kino." Hermes said, relaxed as can be. "That cannon uses multiple propellant charges."

"I'm surprised you know so much!" The guide said, astonished.

"What's that supposed to mean, Hermes?" Kino asked, honestly confused.

"To put it simply, when they launch the projectile, this cannon repeatedly propels the projectile with multiple ignitions. Kind of like having multiple cartridge chambers."

"?" Kino tilted her head.

"Your [Cannon] only ignites once per round, right? And when the liquid gunpowder ignites, the explosion it causes propels the shot out through the barrel and towards the target at really high speeds. That's how all persuaders and cannons work, on a basic level."

"I know that much. So if the projectile is heavier, or if I want to increase its speed, I just have to increase the amount of liquid gunpowder I use... But after a certain point, [Cannon] won't be able to take the pressure and it'll break."

"Right. That's why, if you want to launch a projectile really quickly, or really far, you need to have a really thick and large barrel. That's why they came up with the idea to use multiple propellant charges. This cannon ignites gunpowder over and over again to add speed to the projectile."

"Multiple ignitions?"

"That's right. The projectile is propelled outwards by the first ignition. The cartridge chamber is where the ignition takes place."

"And?"

"There are multiple cartridge chambers next to the barrel, either on the left or the right. Whenever the projectile passes by a cartridge chamber, it's propelled forward even faster by another ignition. They repeat this over and over."

"Oh... I think I get the gist of it. Instead of propelling it forward all at once, they carefully time it so they can continuously push it forward."

"Yeah. See those thick rings around the cylinder? Those are probably the cartridge chambers. I bet it can shoot that huge shell really, really, really far. That's all from me."

"That was amazing, Hermes! Thank you for the explanation!" The guide beamed, applauding. She then supplemented his explanation with her own.

"That cannon can be rotated up to 360 degrees around this dome. We can aim it anywhere! We can adjust the distance by controlling the amount of explosives we use!"

"I see..."

"Because we followed the blueprints very carefully, this cannon is capable of shooting at any point on this planet. No country is safe! In other words, we can rule over this entire world!"

"That's amazing. Maybe you should think about asking for a citizenship here, Kino." Hermes joked.

"With effort, you could probably join the ranks of the Second Class citizens--who are obligated to do labour, of course." The guide said condescendingly. "We'll be having our test shot this afternoon, so I'd recommend staying to watch."

"I see. Where are you shooting at?"

"No one knows the specifics."

"Huh?"

"..."

Hermes repeated his question. Kino silently looked at the guide.

"The target of our test shot was indicated on the blueprint, along with all the necessary measurements. It said, 'If you plan to use this cannon for conquest, be sure to test the cannon with the instructions provided. These calculations are for the maximum firing distance, and therefore must not be neglected'. It gave us a complex formula into which we were to plug in the position of the moon and the stars, the date and time of the launch, the weather, the temperature, and the humidity. With this we would find out the exact amount of explosives to use and the right timings for the ignitions. With our knowledge, it is impossible to tell where this shot will land. Of course, since the instructions are for the maximum distance, we assume it will hit some point on the other side of the planet."

"Huh."

"Once we have completed the test shot, we will begin firing practice shots at nearby countries in order to get a good grasp of using this weapon."

"Miss, can I see that formula of yours? And the blueprint?" Hermes asked.

"Of course. Maybe you could figure it out, Hermes." The guide said, pressing several keys next to the monitor. Images of what seemed to be the cannon's blueprints flashed by, followed by extremely complicated calculations scrolling down before Hermes' headlight. It took several dozen seconds for the calculations to scroll down completely.

"What do you think? It would be helpful if you could tell us. If you can, we could recognize your assistance and easily grant Miss Kino the rank of Common Citizen. We can guarantee you a life of comfort and delicious food every day." The guide said.

"Um..." Unusually for him, Hermes trailed off. "I can't do it. I'm sorry, it's just too complicated. I give up."

"Is that so? I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well, Kino's a traveler. She doesn't really have much to do with world domination or anything."

"I understand. In any case, why not join us for the viewing of the test shot? Aboveground is dangerous, so we will have to watch on a monitor in an underground bunker, of course. Celebrate with us! Afterwards, we will hold a party to commemorate this event. The entire country will, for the first time in half a century, partake in a luxurious meal!"

Replying to the guide without hesitation was not Kino, but Hermes.

"Sorry, but we'll have to decline. We actually have to leave immediately."

"..."

Kino glanced at Hermes.

"Come to think of it..." She said. As the guide looked at her, confused, Hermes explained from the back of the truck.

"We were originally going to stay here three days, but we remembered something really important last night."

"Hm? What might that be?"

"In Kino's homeland, there's a ritual called the 'Belzechamondanez Prayer', where you have to spend one day a month fasting and cleansing yourself in the river. She can't skip out on it even during her travels." Hermes said, making up a bald-faced lie. Kino continued where he left off, calm and plain as ever.

"I'm sorry about this. We're obliged to be in the forest by tomorrow. It was such a long journey that I mixed up my dates."

"I see. You were the first outsider to learn about the cannon, so we were hoping you could stay to watch the glorious shot and the beginning of our valiant history, but..."

"Well, I guess we can come back after the ritual."

"Of course. What will you do now, then?" The guide asked.

"I'll be returning to the hotel to pick up my luggage, refuel Hermes, and stock up on supplies. And then I'll have to leave immediately."

It was nearly noon. The clouds approached the country's airspace, blown over by the westerlies.

"Thanks for everything."

"We'll visit again once you've taken over the world."

Kino and Hermes left the country through the west gate.

As traveler and motorrad departed, the cannon behind them, a guard spoke to the bespectacled beauty.

"Is this really all right? They know about the cannon. Isn't it possible that they changed their plans so suddenly because they wanted to warn a neighboring country? What if they're spies?"

"There's nothing to worry about. After all, what can one traveler do? By the time she reaches the nearest country, we'll have fired the test shot. We are unstoppable now." The guide laughed.

The gates slowly closed shut.

Kino and Hermes made their way through the forest path. And the moment the gates disappeared behind the thick cover of trees, Hermes yelled loudly.

"Kino! Full speed!"

"All right!"

Kino pulled the gas lever.

As Kino and Hermes rode through the forest at breakneck speed, she shouted over the sound of the rumbling engine.

"Setting that 'what-was-it Prayer' aside, what's going on, Hermes?"

"I'll explain later. But right now we have to hurry! We have to get as far away from that country as quickly as we can. Just take care you don't turn too fast and drive us off a cliff, okay?"

"Got it."

Kino and Hermes were on the mountain path, the hollow behind them. She slowed down when she approached a turn, and sped up as much as she could when the road was straight. They climbed over several large peaks, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

Soon, they arrived at a particularly high point in the mountains, from which they could see the hollow.

"This should be far enough. Stop at the hilltop over there, Kino."

"Finally. All right."

Kino let go of the gas lever and stopped Hermes at the top of the hill.

Kino sighed. They had driven so quickly through the mountains that there was sweat running down her face.

Kino dismounted and took off her goggles. Wiping her face with a bandanna she took out of her pocket, she looked back at the hollow.

"We can still see it from here." She said.

Beyond a green hill in the distance, low-hanging clouds covered the sky. And underneath, they could see the giant cannon. It looked rather like a toothpick sticking out of a field of cabbages.

"They're going to launch soon, so let's watch from here. It's going to be really loud, even from this distance."

Kino took out a water bottle from the case beside Hermes' back wheel, and took several gulps.

"Oh! I get it, Hermes. You think the force of the shot might cause a shockwave that might destroy the country. Is that why we had to leave so quickly?"

"Nope. You're right, though. The force of the shot is going to be strong enough to break all the windows in that country. And depending on the place, even rooftops and walls might get blown apart. But everyone's going to be safe underground."

"So... is that cannon going to explode? Is there something wrong in the construction?"

"Wrong again. It looks like it follows the blueprints perfectly."

"Then what is it?"

"You'll find out soon. It's almost time."

Kino looked towards the east. She could see the cannon in the distance.

Kino and Hermes were surrounded by the sound of wind rustling through the leaves.

And several seconds later, they saw a flash of light coming from the tip of the cannon.

A small red light disappeared into the sky in the blink of an eye, its afterimage streaking behind it. It punched a hole through the clouds covering the ground, giving Kino a clear view of the bright blue sky.

A blast of dark smoke flared from the cannon, followed by slow wisps of white smoke. It disappeared in the wind.

"So they shot it..."

"Perfect. It's following the blueprints to the letter. In some ways, I think this country is really advanced. They're sure to hit their target now."

Kino looked around at Hermes.

"...You know where that shot is going to land, don't you?"

"Yup." Hermes said simply.

At that very moment, a sound like a thunderclap and a powerful sonic wave rushed past Kino and Hermes.

"Whoa!"

"It's here."

It was the delayed aftershock of the launch. They could hear its sound in a dull echo from the mountains.

"I bet the people there are as happy as can be. Toasting their success and partying." Hermes said.

"Although I didn't get to eat with them."

"It's better that way. Let's go, Kino. I think we should get further away, just in case."

"What?"

"Never mind, come on! Full speed ahead!"

Kino, though feeling slightly lost, climbed on and started the engine.

They made it over about eight more mountain peaks, as Hermes continued to say, "Not yet, not yet".

And until he gave her permission, Kino quickly rode through the mountains as fast as she could.

The cloud-covered skies went even darker as the sun set. It was evening.

"This should be good enough, Kino. Let's stop here and look at that country again. Make sure you set my side stand on properly, okay?"

Kino did as she was told and stopped Hermes at the top of a hill, just as she had done so earlier. She lowered Hermes' side stand and dug it slightly into the ground.

"Whew..."

Kino wiped her face again, and looked eastward.

"..."

It was impossible to see the cannon with the naked eye. Kino took out a sniping scope from her bag.

In the round frame, Kino searched for the cannon.

"A little to the left. There. A bit lower."

She moved the scope according to Hermes' instructions, and set the white cannon between the crosshairs.

"There. I found it."

Kino took her eye off the scope. She could finally just barely see the little white pin in the distance.

"It's just about time, so I'll answer your question. Kino. Why did we have to rush out of there?"

"Finally."

Kino looked around at Hermes, waiting for his explanation.

"Keep your eye on that country, Kino."

"All right..."

Kino looked back to the east. Hermes began his explanation.

"The people who made those blueprints long ago must have been afraid that the 'cannon' might be used for the wrong purposes. so they made a safety device."

"A safety device?" Kino asked, her eyes fixed on the tiny cannon.

"That's right. If they fire the test shot like the blueprint tell them to..."

Hermes trailed off mid-sentence.

"?"

Although Kino was confused, she kept her eye on the east.

All of a sudden, something shone from out of the corner of her eye, low in the southern sky.

The moment the light shone, it turned into a glowing line.

The line of light pierced the clouds in the south and struck the green lands with the little white cannon.

Everything in the vicinity of the white toothpick was incinerated, as it rose up into the air like a waterspout.

"That's...!"

"Right on the mark."

"What?"

As Kino watched, a tiny red orb of light covered a point in the green woods. The orb suddenly expanded outward like the rising sun, scattering the clouds overhead, before disappearing in the blink of an eye. A huge cloud of smoke rose up through the hole in the sky, blossoming up like a mushroom.

The earth shook.

"Whoa!"

"Uh-oh."

The sudden earthquake forced Kino to the ground. It was soon followed by a monstrous sound--a great roar, similar to the sound of the launch but hundreds of times more terrible. The sound became a sonic boom that crashed over them like a wave. Countless leaves were shaken off the trees.

"Argh!"

"Amazing!"

Kino and Hermes yelled, but their voices were drowned out entirely by the roar.

After several seconds, the sound dissipated, leaving only an echo behind. The earth suddenly stopped shaking.

Hermes, who had just barely managed to keep from falling over, spoke nonchalantly.

"They were right on the mark."

Kino shook off the leaves sticking to her head and turned around.

"No way..."

"That's right. They were shooting for the maximum distance, right? And if they can fire at any point on the planet, that must mean the longest possible distance is-"

"The shot... it circled back to the country?"

"That's right."

"..."

Kino, lost for words, looked around at the scattering mushroom cloud.

"Then..."

"It must have been destroyed."

"The projectile?"

"No."

"That country?"

"No, that entire hollow."

"..."

"They'll probably start calling the hollow a crater from now on."

"What about the people...?"

"That shot must have destroyed the entire hollow. Underground bunkers can only do so much. That was their final meal."

"..."

"Good thing we rushed out of there, huh?"

"Yeah... you saved us. Thank you, Hermes."

"You're welcome. Now, let me teach you how the Belzechamondanez Prayer works. First, you have to fast for an entire-"

"I'll have to decline."

Kino took off her hat with her right hand and put it over her chest.

"..."

After a brief moment of silence, she opened her eyes and put her hat back on.

"You know, Kino, that thing wasn't actually a cannon."

"Then what was it?"

"It's something called a 'mass driver'. It's used for shooting things into outer space. Though, I guess the only difference between a mass driver and a cannon is what you use it for."

"I see..." Kino said, fingering [Cannon], which was holstered over her thigh.

"So in the end, we never got to see a sundial or have a delicious meal..."

Just as Kino made to get back on Hermes, he spoke up.

"Huh? That's surprising. There's a car coming up ahead."

Kino looked down at the sloped path leading west.

Three cars were driving through the forest, the fallen leaves swirling in the wind.

They were four-wheel drive vehicles packed to the brim with traveling gear. Kino fingered [Cannon] for a moment and pushed Hermes to the side of the road.

The car at the head of the team drove into a straight stretch of road leading up to the hill. The driver noticed Kino waving at them and blinked his lights on and off.

The three cars stopped a slightly ahead of Kino and Hermes. Three men and women, all with rifles slung over their shoulders, climbed out of the car. They were of varying ages between twenty and forty. The trio signaled their friends in the cars further back and approached Kino and Hermes.

"Oh! A traveler!"

"Good evening!"

"Hello!"

They extended their greetings.

"Good evening." Kino said. The man who looked to be their leader spoke first.

"That earthquake just now was something else, eh? Are you all right?"

"I'm doing fine, thank you."

"We're from a country far to the northwest. A traveler told us about a strange place where the entire country is a sundial! We're on our way to go see it for ourselves."

"..."

"You're coming from the east, right? The country must be in that direction. Have you seen it, by any chance?"

"Yes, I did. But it's not there anymore." Kino said honestly.

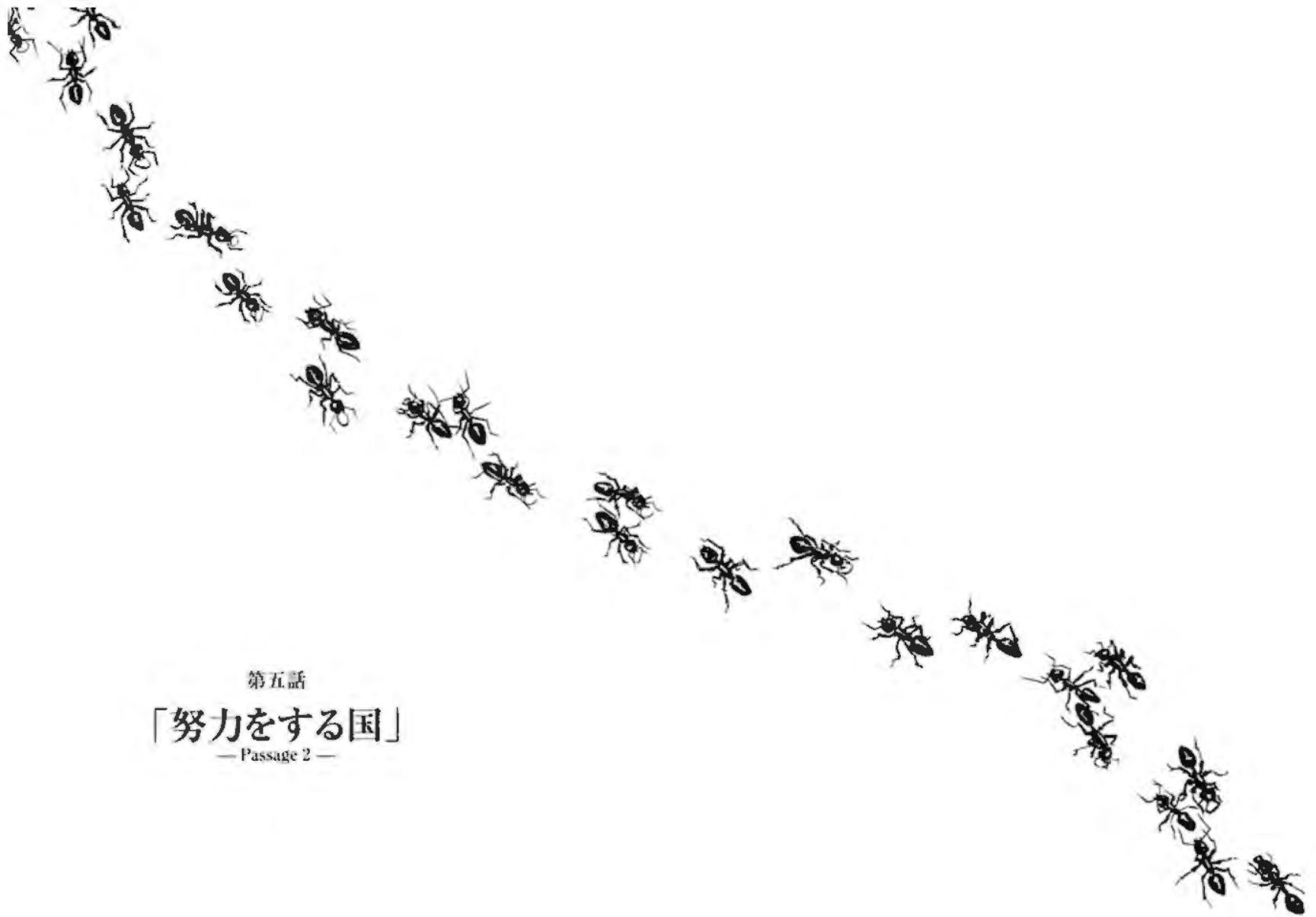
"What? What do you mean?"

"I can explain, but it's a very long story."

"That's fine by me. By all means, tell us! In exchange... how about this? One of our members here used to be a chef. We just caught ourselves a deer, and we have fresh fish and vegetables. We'll have you over for a scrumptious dinner in exchange. What do you say?"

"Don't mind if I do!" Kino said immediately.

"Of course." Hermes groaned.



第五話
「努力をする国」
— Passage 2 —

Chapter 5 - A Land of Endeavors
~Passage 2~

This is a story of a certain place on a certain day.

A lone car was driving along a road at the bottom of a great valley.

The road was smooth and polished. Running right beside it was a stream of fresh, clean water. The road snaked along the base of the valley, leading deeper inside.

On either side of the road and the stream were rugged rock cliffs, grey and unwelcoming. Not a single tree grew on the rocks--only small patches of grass poked through the cracks.

The sky was clear and beautiful, but something about its splendor looked quite fleeting and ephemeral.

The cold silence of the desolate landscape was broken only by the sound of the sputtering car engine, its noise ringing out into the skies.

The car was a small yellow mess. It looked like only a miracle was keeping it running at this point.

It was towing another car behind it. Or rather, a large hand cart made of metal pipes. Sturdy tires were built onto either side of the cart, which shook and rattled in rhythm with the yellow car.

In the cart were many large vinyl bags, filled up and looking somewhat like sandbags used to build dikes during floods.

Over the bags was a blue tarp, which was secured to the cart by a strong piece of rope.

"Beautiful scenery, don't you think? The quality of this road's nothing to sneeze at, either." Said the man sitting on the right side, behind the wheel.

He was a slightly short but handsome man. He wore a short brown jacket with the collar set upright.

"If only it weren't so damned freezing here. It's summertime, for crying out loud. Of course, considering our altitude and latitude, I suppose it's only natural." The man added, trying to close his collar closer to his neck. He was wearing a thin pair of gloves.

Cold air mercilessly batted at them through the wide-open windows.

"This is nothing." Said the woman sitting in the passenger seat. Her long, shimmery black hair was tucked into her jacket so it wouldn't blow around.

"I'm afraid cold weather's my worst enemy. In any case, Master..."

The man glanced at the cart behind them with the cracked side-view mirror.

"Look at how much we ended up buying. You do understand that we'll incur heavy losses if we don't manage to sell it all?"

The woman called 'Master' seemed nonchalant about it all.

"It's all right. I acquired reliable information. They'll buy it all at astronomical prices, though I can't say I know why."

The man looked curious.

"Are they digging a tunnel of some sort, I wonder?"

No one answered his question.

Car pulled car as they drove along a great distance.

"Oh!"

"We're finally here."

They had just passed through a large curve in the valley, when they spotted the land to which they were headed. It was a small country, beyond which they could see the end of the valley.

The country was encircled by a black wall, and looked as though it was neatly nested within the valley itself.

A little distance beyond the village, the valley turned white.

There was no road or stream there.

A great, blinding mass of white was covering the end of the valley, reaching into the distance until it was hidden entirely from view by the mountains around it.

The object was made entirely of ice. Its edges were jagged, forming walls higher than the walls around the country.

"So this is what they call a 'glacier', is it? I'd heard about them in the past, but this is my first time seeing it in person..." The man squinted against the harsh radiance of the glacier as he drove along. "So they were telling the truth. A real glacier... What do you say to having a quick look at it once we've sold our stock of explosives, Master?"

"Of course. But only after we've finished with business." The woman answered.

The little car slowly sputtered towards the country.

They entered the country, dragging behind them a veritable mound of explosives.

"Travelers! Welcome to our country!"

They were received with open arms.

Of course, a great deal of the welcome was for the explosives they had brought along. They sold their stock at exorbitant prices in the blink of an eye, cart and all.

In conclusion, they were now much richer than when they first entered the country.

"Quite excellent, don't you think, Master? What do you say to a few more of these trips?"

"If you're willing to drive through the cold, by all means."

"Then I assure you, I have no complaints!"

"But first, let me ask these people something."

The man and the woman parked their car and approached the people who had purchased their stock of explosives. They were now beginning to transport it.

"Since these travelers brought us all these explosives, we won't need to wait for our regular supply! Let's get to work!"

As the people excitedly hurried hither-dither, the woman asked them what they were planning to do with the explosives.

"By all means, stay and have a look before you leave!" They told her, and led them to the ramparts from which they could see the glacier.

"Can you see the edge of that glacier?" Their guide asked. The man and the woman nodded.

Beyond the boulder-littered valley was a great white wall, towering over them like a fortress.

People carrying the explosives had climbed to the top, and were busy at work with something. They soon completed their task and quickly vacated the glacier area.

"We're ready. Let's begin. Fire in the hole!"

The moment the guide finished, the ground shook. A moment later, a powerful noise echoed across the valley.

The explosives went off at different points along the glacier. Pieces of ice split open and cracked, slowly crumbling and scattering over the earth.

The sonic boom of the avalanche followed and rang out through the valley. By the time it faded, the glacier was slightly but surely smaller than it had been before.

"Ah, so that's what it was for. It's little wonder you'd need a mountain of explosives for a job like yours." The man commented, astonished. "Of course! Is it possible that the glacier needs to be kept in check in order to prevent your country from being engulfed?" he asked triumphantly.

"Not at all."

"Oh?"

"Even without our intervention, that glacier will not reach our country. It has never done so in the past."

"Then... could it be that you use that ice for industrial purposes, or sell them as products to other nations?" The man asked.

"That is one of our secondary benefits, yes, but not our main purpose."

"Then...?"

"Then?"

The guide answered the duo's questions.

"We are trying to warm up our planet."

"I beg your pardon?" The man asked.

The guide began to explain, much like a professor in a lecture hall.

"Travelers. Have you ever heard of a theory that claims that human industry is slowly warming up the planet?"

"Well, I can't say I haven't."

"'Global Warming', wasn't it?"

The man and the woman replied. The guide nodded, satisfied.

"We first heard of this theory when we read through an old book. It said, 'Global Warming will melt glaciers'."

"I see..."

"And?"

Up until this point, the two travelers had no difficulty following their guide's line of thought.

"Reading this, we realized something. Clearly, the solution was to melt all the glaciers in the world."

The travelers tilted their heads. Their guide continued enthusiastically.

"This is why we decided to begin by melting that glacier you see before you. We sell the pieces to distant lands, melt them under the sunlight, or toss them into the stream. What do you think happens then?"

"Huh? Oh, well, I wonder..." The man was taken aback by the sudden question.

"Naturally, it means that the planet will slowly become warmer! And that will make our land so much more livable. We can say goodbye to the harsh winters! Travelers, you won't have to wear winter jackets in the middle of summer anymore!"

"Well, I suppose..."

"Don't you agree? I'm sure that by our grandchildren's time, the world will become a much better place for us all!"

"..."

The man said nothing.

"I understand. I hope things go well for your country's efforts." The woman said.

"Of course! We shall endeavor to bring upon us a brighter future! To change the world!" The guide replied enthusiastically.

"But..." The man started.

"What is it?"

"I understand your plan in theory. But don't you agree it may be a rather difficult task for your country alone?"

"Not at all, sir. Our country has a saying, you see. We put our faith entirely in this message."

"Oh, and what might that be?"

"The saying goes--"

The two travelers spent two nights in the country of endless explosions.

On the third morning, the shabby yellow car drove out the gates it had entered through. It was no longer dragging a cart behind it.

As they passed through the country's walls, the man looked out the window and at the land one last time before stepping on the gas pedal.

"Master. Do you think they'll ever be rewarded for their efforts?"

"Who knows? Even if they are, I'm sure we'll be long gone by then. It doesn't really matter either way."

"I suppose you're right. Now, what do you say to a few more return trips? Where there's money to be had, I'd like to be present, after all."

"As long as you put in some effort." The woman said.

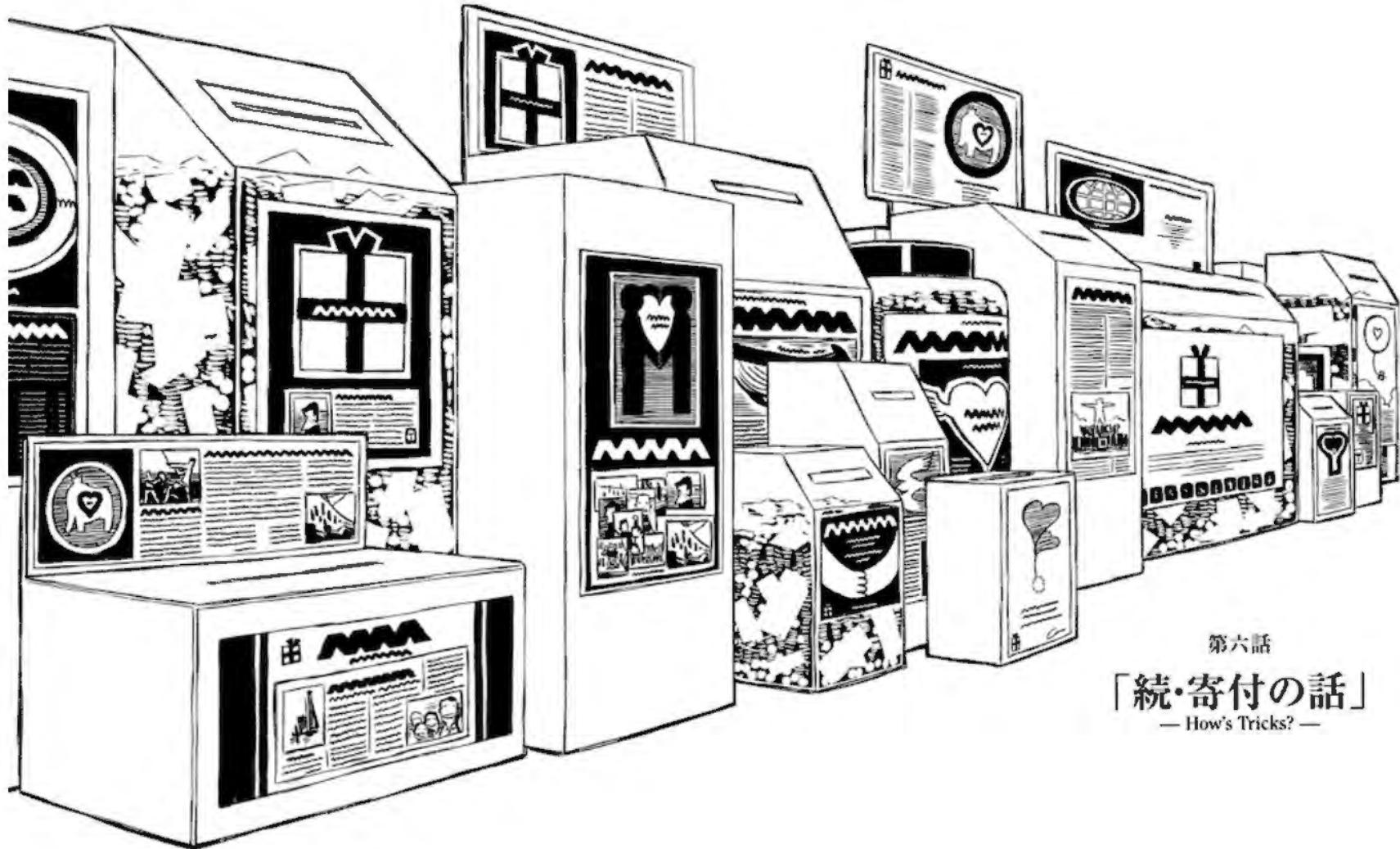
"Absolutely!" The man replied, "I'll show you my greatest endeavor yet. I won't lose out to those people, mark my words."

The man looked ahead as he stepped down on the gas pedal.

As the little car disappeared from view, a large flag emblazoned with the words of the people's belief fluttered atop its tower.

The bold words by which the people lived were:

[One small step is the beginning of planetary change. Never give up. Do your best.]



第六話

「続・寄付の話」
— How's Tricks? —

Chapter 6 - Continued - A Tale of Charity
~How's Tricks?~

A motorrad was racing across a long, unbranching road.

The spring grass danced in the wind, and a carpet of green stretched as far as the eye could see. The sky was so blue it was almost cold to look at.

"What a haul, Kino!" The motorrad exclaimed, moving down the firm dirt path.

On either side of the motorrad's back wheel was a black container, and over it was a bag and a sleeping bag. Small cloth sacks hung from everywhere, shaking in rhythm with the motorrad.

The rider named Kino, who wore a black jacket, smiled underneath the goggles.

"You can say that again. I got new shirts and new underwear, I bought a great new sleeping bag, and I bought more ammunition for [Woodsman] and [Flute]. And you too, Hermes..."

The motorrad named Hermes continued where Kino left off.

"I got a motor oil change, new chains, and we stocked up on extra plugs."

"And fuel and rations. We even bought sacks to fit everything in."

"All thanks to those donations!" Hermes said. Kino nodded.

"Yeah. I don't think I could ever thank them enough."

"But over half the donations they collected went to the Traveler's Aid Society's pockets, right? It would have been nice if we could have taken a bit more, like seventy percent. What happened to the greedy old Kino I know? Is she off traveling somewhere without me? Did she have a change of cart?"

Kino looked up into the sky and thought for a moment.

"...Hermes, did you mean... 'change of heart'?"

"Yeah, that's right!"

Hermes went quiet after that.

"That was a bit hard to figure out, Hermes."

"Really? Anyway, what actually happened?"

Kino looked back at the luggage behind her. A bag, a sleeping bag, and several small sacks. The country they had departed from was no longer visible past the horizon.

Kino looked ahead again.

"They're the ones who did this for me. And what would I do with so much money? I don't think I could ever spend it all. And if I bought things I could sell for a good price in other countries, like jewelry, everyone would have noticed something was wrong."

"True."

"Actually, there was something I was so worried about I didn't even tell you, Hermes. Since I can't see the country from here anymore, I'll tell you."

"Oh? What is it?"

"All right. So about what I did--pretending to be a poor traveler receiving charity from the generous citizens--it's actually something Master did when she visited this country before. She did the same thing and came out richer."

"Wow, that's amazing. Looks like she was always that evil, huh?"

"But I think even Master felt bad about it afterwards. She told me something later."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'If I ever get the chance to return, I would tell the people everything'."

"Huh. So I guess she never ended up coming back."

Kino looked up into the sky. A trio of birds were flying in a circle in the air, their wings spread wide.

Kino turned her gaze back to the road and answered.

"That's right. And she said something else too: 'Kino, if you ever end up visiting that country, and there are still people tricking others in this way, make sure you reveal the truth. But only after you've received everything you could'."

"Huh?"

"So I wrote letters explaining everything and sent them to that country's press organizations. In secret."

"Kino... no way."

"Yeah. I made sure to explain all the details, so there must be a huge commotion going on about now."

"You're terrible, Kino."

"It's not nice to take advantage of innocent people." Kino smiled.

"Then why didn't you tell them earlier?" Hermes asked.

"Because no one would believe me otherwise."

"True." Hermes answered. For some time, only the sound of his engine could be heard on the plain.

Eventually, Kino spoke up with a tone of satisfaction.

"So in the end, 'We left with all kinds of goodies', 'The people learned the truth', and 'The fraudsters were arrested'. All's well that ends well."

"You should think about becoming a con artist yourself, Kino. I bet those people are livid right about now."

"Maybe you're right. But..."

"But?"

"It's their fault for falling for it."

The motorrad raced across the long, unbranching road.



第七話

「手紙の話」
— the Weak Link —

Chapter 7 - A Tale of Letters

~The Weak Link~

My name is Riku. I am a dog. I have long, soft, white fur. I may always look like I'm smiling, but I was just born with this look; it doesn't necessarily mean I am happy all the time.

My owner is Master Shizu. He is a young man who always wears a green sweater. Complex reasons have left him without a homeland, and now he travels the world on a buggy.

Another member of our group is Ti. She is a silent little girl with a fondness for grenades. Complex reasons have left her without a homeland, and so she recently joined us in our journey.

We were on a very cold plain.

From the stopped buggy we could see rocky brown earth, not even a single blade of grass poking through the cracks. Over our heads was nothing but dark cloud cover.

It was past noon, but it was impossible to tell where the sun was located. The temperature was below freezing. Our breaths froze in the air.

There was no wind. We could hear nothing save for the soft, low rumbling of the buggy's engine.

"I don't see anything. Let's move on." Master Shizu said from atop the driver's seat, and slowly sat back down.

Over his usual sweater, Master Shizu wore a thick green winter jacket and a hood over his head. He had a pair of goggles over his eyes, and a muffler was covering his mouth, pulled up from his neck. There were thick winter gloves over his hands, which were carrying a large pair of binoculars.

"..."

Ti quietly sat in the passenger seat, with myself between her knees and her chin on my head.

She was also dressed entirely in white winter clothes. Her tiny white form, along with the puffy cut of her jackets, made her look rather like a little snowman. On her head was a wool hat we acquired in a country we visited earlier, and around her neck was a muffler in which some of my fur was mixed. Over her emerald-green eyes were a thin pair of goggles used for horseback riding.

Master Shizu started the buggy. We briskly drove across the hard soil. Icy wind blew into the car and blasted us mercilessly.

Of course, being covered in fur, I wasn't very cold.

"..."

Ti quietly embraced my head. Was she feeling cold, or was she worrying for my sake? I could not tell.

Master Shizu continued driving for some time.

And he stopped the buggy again at some point on these desolate plains.

Master Shizu stood up on the driver's seat again, and slowly looked around through the binoculars as though searching for something.

As Master Shizu slowly rotated from his seat, he stopped suddenly.

"There! I see him!"

Master Shizu hurriedly took a seat and quickly started the buggy again.

It had all started the day before.

During our travels, we passed through a very cold land and arrived at a certain country.

It was a peaceful and laid-back country that was not very well developed. Machinery and engines were limited to factories and the like. The country's vast lands were covered in fields that had been completely harvested, now covered in snow.

We were welcomed with open arms, but again our dreams of settling permanently were let down.

In the end, we stocked up on fuel and supplies, intending to set off immediately for warmer climes. However, we were suddenly stopped.

"Traveler! We need your assistance! Please, help us find someone!"

A group of desperate-looking men in black uniforms rushed over to us. They were postmen.

Master Shizu carefully listened to their story.

According to them, this country had a very good relationship with its neighbor, interacting with them constantly. They had a large quantity of mail passing between them as well.

We were told that postmen carried letters from one country to another via small horse-drawn carriages. However, one of their friends was missing--it had already been four days since his scheduled arrival date.

They suspected that their friend may have been stranded by the unusually sheer cold. They had resolved to go out to search for their fellow postman. However, they had a problem.

"Traveler, I'm sure your vehicle will help us locate our friend much faster than our carriages. Please, we beg of you! It's not much, but we will compensate you to the best of our abilities!"

Master Shizu did not speak of the men's intended compensation and heartily accepted their call for help.

We left to search for the missing postman at the break of dawn.

A slight distance ahead of the buggy was the object Master Shizu had found with his binoculars.

First we saw a horse, completely still and lying on the ground. It was probably dead.

As the buggy got closer, we spotted a man beside the collapsed horse. He must have been the missing postman. He was lying on the cold earth, clutching something in his arms.

Beside him were signs of a campfire. Seeing as we could not see a carriage anywhere, he had likely broken it down and used it as firewood.

I recalled the postmen's conversation.

"If he used the carriage for firewood... or even the letters... he might still have a chance!"

"But... but that's against regulations..."

"Who cares about regulations?! He might die out there!"

If he had kept the fire going all this time, there was a chance he had not yet frozen to death.

Master Shizu drove the buggy as fast as he could and came to a sudden stop beside the man.

"We're here to help you!" Master Shizu yelled, jumping off the buggy and running up to the man. Ti and I followed behind him.

"We're here to help! Can you hear me?"

Master Shizu reached out a hand to the fallen man and slowly looked into his face.

Soon, we could tell if we were talking to a man or a corpse.

And--

"Uh..."

The man was alive. A weak moan escaped his lips.

"Please, wake up!"

Master Shizu helped the man sit up.

The postman was a man in his late twenties. His eyes were shut, and his face was devoid of life. Hypothermia had left his nose and cheeks discolored. His lips moved very faintly.

"W-who... who are..."

The man Master Shizu was supporting was clutching a large bag in his arms. It was made of black leather.

"I'm a traveler. Your fellow postmen have asked me to search for you. It's all right now. We'll take you back to your country straightaway. Everyone will be glad to see you've held on." Master Shizu said. The man's reply was feeble and shaky.

"Is... the bag... still... here...?"

"Yes, it is. It's right here. " Master Shizu answered.

"I... I could... never... burn it... please... please..." He said, his voice more firm and resolute than ever before.

And with that, he breathed his last.

"Sir? Sir? Wake up!"

Master Shizu desperately tried to save the man, slapping his cheeks and attempting a heart massage.

But the man would never speak again.

Master Shizu sighed, his breath freezing into wisps of white.

"Is he dead?" Ti asked quietly.

"Yes. He is." Master Shizu said, not intent on hiding the truth.

Master Shizu folded the man's arms over his chest, and carefully opened the bag entrusted to him by the dying man.

"..."

Master Shizu looked inside first, then passed it over so Ti and I could see as well.

Inside the bag were countless letters, bundled together by dozens.

I remembered what the other postmen had said.

"He might have survived if he had burned these letters." I said to Master Shizu.

"Maybe he could have."

Master Shizu slowly closed up the bag.

He then addressed the dead man.

"I will honor your request. You've protected these letters with your life, and so I will make sure that these letters reach your country. Every last one of them."

"..."

Ti watched Master Shizu in silence.

It was evening by the time the buggy arrived at the country, carrying the postman's corpse and the bag of letters.

The other postmen, faced with the corpse of their friend, and hearing Master Shizu's account, burst into tears.

After a long, heartfelt cry, the men returned to work. They agreed to deliver the letters in the morning, along with personal apologies for the delay.

"Please allow me to watch as well." Master Shizu said.

The next morning.

The sky was clear. It was starting to get warmer.

Two postmen started off on their route, carrying the letters in their carriage. We followed after them on our buggy.

The postmen visited the houses dotted over the country's vast territory. When they arrived at each house, they did not leave the letter in the mailbox--instead, they pressed the doorbell to deliver the letters personally.

"Here's your letter. We apologize for the delay."

The postmen politely apologized as they delivered the letters.

We watched it all from a distance.

Most people did not care very much that the delivery was late, not asking why their mail was delayed.

"Thank you." They said normally, accepting the letters.

They were about halfway through the letters, sometime in the afternoon.

"What is wrong with you people?! It's postmarked seven days ago! It normally only takes two or three days! What were you people doing?!"

Shouting at the postmen was a middle-aged man. The postmen made no excuses, merely apologizing over and over for the delay.

"Sir, we will make sure this does not happen again..." They said, bowing their head, but the man continued to raise his voice.

"This is unacceptable! What if I have urgent business, you lazy slobs?!"

"Please, sir..."

"Why was my letter late?!"

"We apologize, sir, but I'm afraid we're not at liberty to disclose the reasons... We apologize again for the delay."

"You think you're going to get away with-"

Then, the man spotted us.

He spotted us, the anomalous travelers and our motorized vehicle.

"Aren't those people the travelers who came to our country earlier...?" He mumbled, and thought for a moment.

"Has something happened...?" He asked the postmen.

"..."

Master Shizu said nothing, merely watching the postmen from the distance.

"..."

Ti also said nothing, quietly looking into the man's face.

"We apologize, sir, but I'm afraid we're not at liberty to disclose the reasons..." The postmen repeated again, sorrow clear in their faces.

The man seemed to have noticed that something was wrong.

"I suppose something must have happened... Anything to do with this cold weather, by any chance?"

The postmen looked as though they were about to burst into tears.

"Fine! I won't say anything more. I'll take that letter, if you will!"

With that, the man turned around and stepped back into his house. But just before he closed the door,

"Thank you!"

He said loudly.

The postmen solemnly continued with their work.

It was evening, with the winter sun setting on the horizon. The postmen took the final letter to its destination.

"This is it. Once we deliver this letter, our work will be finished." They said to Master Shizu. They must have emphasized that word to include their late friend.

"..."

Master Shizu, who had resolved to see this work through to the last, quietly nodded.

"..."

I could not tell what Ti was thinking, but she was watching everything silently.

The postmen rang the doorbell. A woman in her fifties stepped out.

She was wearing a coat, obviously feeling cold. Surprised at the postmen and us, the travelers, she asked what was going on.

The postmen apologized for the delay as they presented her the final letter.

"..."

The woman stared at it, annoyed and irritated.

"That letter..." She said, "It's from the lawyer, isn't it?"

The postmen checked the letter and nodded.

The woman sighed disdainfully.

"Could you take that letter back?"

"..."

The postmen were lost for words. The woman continued.

"That's from my ex-husband. We got divorced last year--he was the worst sort of man who'd beat me on a whim. He finally got arrested and got charged with assault. After that, he moved out of the country. I don't know how many times he's sent letters to me through his lawyer. But he never once apologized. Always trying to make excuses and defending himself. I stopped letting my daughter read them. I feel sick just thinking about him now. I was just thinking I'd start burning or ripping up his letters without reading them."

"So... um, ma'am..."

"This is perfect. Since you've come here in person, I'd like to officially refuse to receive the letter. Could you take it back and take care of it? I'm sure the post office has regulations for cases like this."

"...Y-yes, of course..." The postman said, dejected.

"Thank you." The woman said, satisfied, and turned around.

"Stop."

She froze on the spot.

"Ti?" Master Shizu said in shock, turning around. The postmen and the woman also looked at her.

"What is it, young lady?" The woman asked. Her tone was soft, but she was not smiling.

"You have to read it." Ti answered immediately, a stark contrast to her usual silence. The woman frowned in confusion as Ti repeated herself.

"Read it."

"Why do you say that? Listen, the man who sent me this letter would always hit me and hurt me. I get very upset just reading his letters. So why?"

"Read it."

"...Persistent brat..."

The woman looked up at the postmen.

"Who is this girl? These people look like the travelers that came in earlier, but why are they with you?"

"We're terribly sorry, ma'am. But we're not at liberty to disclose that information."

"You can't expect me to understand that. Mr. Traveler, could you explain?" The woman demanded, glaring at Master Shizu.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you much more than these men are allowed. However..." Master Shizu said gently.

"Yes?"

"A postman went through a great deal of trouble to deliver these letters."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

The woman sighed loudly.

"I know that you must work very hard to deliver these letters, but that doesn't mean that I don't go through any trouble myself." The woman said.

"But you have to read it."

"Young lady, you can't just convince people to do things without giving them a reason."

"Read it."

"Young lady, do you even know how to talk? Can't you say anything else?"

"Read it."

"..."

"Read it."

The woman sighed loudly.

"Fine. But this will be the last time. Next time I get a letter from him, I will shred it on the spot, do you understand?"

"Okay."

"Hmph." The woman snorted, and snatched the letter from the teary-eyed postmen. They sighed.

The woman ripped open the envelope on the spot, and took out the letter inside.

"Ah, a short letter for once." She muttered, and quietly began reading.

She stoically read the first line.

"..."

At the second line, her brow furrowed as she glared at the paper with a look sharp enough to kill.

"Oh."

Then she was silent.

The woman's hands began trembling as her eyes widened.

"Oh..."

"Huh?"

"Hm?"

"..."

We were next to be surprised.

Tears began falling from the woman's eyes like a set of waterfalls. Her tears ran down her cheeks and fell to the ground.

"Oh my..."

The woman wept as she clutched the letter to her chest, falling to her knees at her door.

"Oh... Oh... Thank God... Thank God..."

But she did not thank the people there.

"Good day, ma'am." The postmen said, turning to return to their carriage.

The men were sniffling, but probably not because of the cold.

"Are you leaving?" Master Shizu asked quietly.

"Yes. Our work is done..."

"Our job is not to find out about the contents of the letters, only to deliver them. If you'll excuse us, traveler. You have our deepest gratitude."

The postmen did not look back as they climbed onto the carriage. The departed, leaving only the echo of hooves in their wake.

The woman, who was crying on her doorstep the entire time, wiped her eyes with her sleeve and sniffled several times as she got to her feet.

"..."

The woman looked at the stoic Ti, her eyes red and swollen.

"Thank you, young lady."

"..."

"If not for you, I would never have known something so important."

"..."

"And I'm sorry for calling you a brat. You're a very sweet girl. I'm sure you'll grow up to be a beautiful young woman. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me."

"Of course. But still. Thank you. Thank you."

Master Shizu looked at the woman's kindly expression and closed his eyes satisfactorily. He must have been remembering the postman who had entrusted us with this task.

"Then if you'll excuse us." Master Shizu bowed lightly, looking back at Ti. "Let's go."

He turned back to the buggy.

The moment we began walking away, the woman rushed into her house, letter in hand.

"Honey, look at this! Wonderful news! This is splendid!" She said to her daughter, who was waiting inside.

We could also hear her voice.

And so we could clearly hear her say,

"It says that bastard just died in an accident!"



第八話
「賭の話」
— Which is Which. —

Chapter 8 - A Tale of Gambles

~Which is Which.~

These stories take place in a certain country where cars and bicycles are the only modes of transportation.

< = >

The fourteen year-old boy was torn about love.

On his mind was a gentle-looking girl with long hair. On the first day of class, she sat next to him and read through the handout alongside him.

Afterwards, they began exchanging greetings in the mornings and when they passed each other in the halls.

Eventually, the boy started getting very excited for school. All the other girls just looked like backdrops compared to her. The boy came to the conclusion that he was in love.

She didn't seem to dislike him, but they hadn't yet spoken one-on-one. He didn't even know very much about her.

But it was true that he was in love with her. Shouldn't he at least make his feelings clear before someone got ahead of him and asked her out?

Or would a sudden confession end up in their budding relationship being irreparably broken? Should he take his time and get to know her better?

The boy turned the matter over in his mind again and again.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and he would go back to school. What should he say to her first? "I like you", or "good morning"?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The boy looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a bicycle, I'll ask her out. And if it's a car, I'll wait until later!"

< = >

The forty-two year-old man was torn about his job.

He had been employed at the same firm for twenty years, but he had been long dissatisfied with his company's treatment of him.

It was a large company, but no matter how hard he worked, his boss never gave him a raise. He was constantly stuck working under people his own age or younger.

Was he just being discriminated against? Did he even have a future in this company? He thought to himself as he sought after information.

He found a small company where he would be paid less in the short term. But it might eventually lead him to better opportunities. They had already promised him a position should he choose to quit his current company.

Considering his age, this was his last chance. But a pay cut, even a temporary one, would make things difficult for his family as he and his wife raised their two children. He could not afford to mess up in his new workplace. And the new company's future was not guaranteed.

He discussed the matter with his wife at length.

"Honey, this is your life. In the end, you're the only one who can make that choice. I'll trust your judgement."

The decision was his. He thought it over in his head.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and he would go back to work. What should he place on his boss's desk? A letter of resignation, or his paperwork?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The man looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, I'll take the new job. And if it's a bicycle, I'll stay where I am!"

< = >

The nineteen year-old woman was torn about marriage.

Her older boyfriend, whom she had been dating for less than a year now, had passionately proposed marriage to her.

She had no doubts about her love for him. He was a handsome man of means whom she thought was almost too good for her. Marrying him would give her a life with very few worries.

But was it wise to marry when she was still so young? Wouldn't it be best to enjoy her youth and gain some more life experience before putting a seal on her future like this?

And what if she were to meet someone even better in the future?

She racked her brains again and again.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and after work she would go on a date with him. How should she respond? Yes, or no?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The woman looked out from her apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a bicycle, I'll marry him. And if it's a car, I'll decline!"

< = >

The eighteen year-old student was torn about his future.

He would soon have to go to college. He had already passed his entrance exams, and all he had to do now was submit his acceptance form. Starting next term, he could be a college student.

But if he did so, he would have to give up on his passion--acting.

Perhaps he should forget about college and join an acting troupe to follow his dreams. Perhaps this was the best thing to do for his future.

But he had no idea if he would become successful as an actor or if he could make a living on the stage.

If he chose to go to college, he could study like everyone else, get a job like everyone else, and live like everyone else. This was the stable road.

He could not decide.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, but should he go to the post office to send his acceptance form, or make a phone call to turn down the offer?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The student looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, I'll choose acting. And if it's a bicycle, I'll go to college!"

< = >

The eighty-nine year-old man was torn about what he should do with his money after his death.

He would pass away of his illness soon, but he had not yet decided on what to do with his vast estate.

His wife had passed before him, and their only son was a grown man who did not live with him. By normal standards, he would have had his son inherit everything, but he could not figure out if this was the right thing to do.

His lazy son squandered money like water. If he were to pass on his estate to him, the boy might quit his job and live a life of wasteful leisure.

Then would it not be best for everyone to donate it all to a reliable charity?

The old man thought very hard.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, but what should he say to his lawyer when he called him?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The old man looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a bicycle, I'll pass it all on to my son. And if it's a car, I won't leave him a penny!"

< = >

The thirty-nine year-old housewife was torn on what to make for dinner.

Should she treat herself this time and make stew, her favorite? Or should she make hamburgers, which her husband and child loved?

She looked up at the ceiling and groaned.

She would go to the supermarket now, but what should she buy?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

She looked out from her apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, I'll make hamburgers for dinner. And if it's a bicycle, I'll make stew!"

< = >

The fifteen year-old boy was torn on which book to buy.

Tomorrow was the day the new novels would be released--two new works by his two favorite authors.

He was excited because the advertisements for both books looked very interesting, but thanks to that, he could no longer decide on what to buy.

His meagre allowance would not allow him to buy both at once. He had another book he wanted to get next month, so he would have to give up on one or the other.

But obviously, if the book he bought was not very good, he would regret not buying the other one. But it wasn't realistic for him to read both of them in the bookstore before buying one.

If he waited for reviews, then he wouldn't be able to read it tomorrow. Not only that, there was no guarantee that his tastes were completely in line with those of the reviewers'.

The boy clutched his allowance and trembled.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and he would go to the bookstore. Which book should he purchase?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The boy looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a bicycle, I'll get _____. And if it's a car, I'll get the other one!"

< = >

The twenty-seven year-old designer was torn about the placement of a single line.

He focused all his efforts on creating a piece for his company's car design competition. He was now nearly finished.

But he was torn on one last point--where to put the line that would go on the side of the chassis.

Should he place a line with a curve towards the back on a higher point, to bring to mind a muscled predator ready to pounce on its prey?

Or should he place it lower in order to bring to mind an impression of slender speed?

He would be confident about either choice, but he had no idea which design the judges would prefer.

The designer was holding his pen tightly, but it was not moving.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and he would go back to work. Which design should he submit?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The man looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, I'll draw the line higher. And if it's a bicycle, I'll put it lower!"

< = >

The couple in their thirties were torn on what they should name their newborn.

They had been unable to decide on a name for their baby boy.

They already had three daughters, who were each named with a character symbolizing spring, summer, and fall.

If they had a fourth daughter, they would have given her a beautiful name with the character for winter to match her sisters. But their new baby was a son.

Of course, they could just follow their pattern and give him the beautiful winter name. This would make the siblings' names a wonderful set.

But since they had a boy, they thought that perhaps they should give him a strong, masculine name. And they were worried that, if they gave him the winter name, he would grow up to think that his parents wanted a daughter after all.

The couple was at a loss.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, and they would go to the government office. How should they name him?

"All right! We'll just do this!"

The couple looked out from their apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a bicycle, We'll give him a strong, masculine name. And if it's a car, we'll stick to the pattern!"

< = >

The forty-five year-old chef was torn about the new menu.

She had come up with a new dessert and was going to present it for the first time at her restaurant.

She had gone as far as deciding on an ice cream-filled parfait, but she was torn on what flavor of ice cream to use.

The beef-flavored one had a thick texture, rather like steak. It was sure to be a favorite of meat lovers.

On the other hand, the chicken-flavored ice cream was light and soft. The thin salty flavor accentuated the taste of chicken, and it would be a hit that even people stuffed with full-course meals could enjoy.

The employee who taste-tested both looked rather uncertain and gave up on passing judgement. It was now all up to her.

The chef could not choose between her two masterpieces.

Tomorrow the holidays would end, but which dessert should she showcase?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The chef looked out from her apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, it'll be beef. And if it's a bicycle, chicken it is!"

< = >

The thirty-six year-old man was torn on his next course of action.

Lying in his bathtub was a corpse.

It was the corpse of the girlfriend with whom he had been speaking not too long ago. He had concealed from her the fact that he was already married, and that he was living alone right now for his work. He had been seeing her claiming that he was thinking of marriage.

His girlfriend came to see him today with an ecstatic smile, announcing that she was pregnant and asking when they should get married.

Realizing that he could lie no longer, he gave her a heartfelt apology and confessed everything.

When she realized that she had been fooled, she became outraged and cried that she would reveal everything to his wife and his company. The man desperately did what he could to silence his indignant girlfriend. And before he knew it, she had become a corpse.

The man thought to himself that, should he turn himself in and claim that he was not in his right mind, he would receive a lighter sentence. This was the only moral choice available to a murderer. He had even gone so far as lift the receiver once.

But if he did so, he would lose his job, his wife, their child, and everything he valued about life. The man put down the receiver and wondered if he could hide the corpse so it would not be discovered.

He could drain all the blood in the bathtub and cut her into tiny pieces. He could flush the smaller bits down the toilet, and he could carefully mix in the bigger parts with his garbage and dispose of it discreetly.

He had told her very clearly that she should not tell anyone about their relationship. He could yet have a chance to bury everything in secrecy.

But if he was caught, his sentence would become heavier. He would spend even longer in jail, and he might possibly be stuck there for as long as he lived.

His pale lips trembled as he deliberated the issue.

Tomorrow the holidays would end. Should he take the corpse out with the garbage, or not?

"All right! I'll just do this!"

The man looked out from his apartment window.

"If the next thing that passes by is a car, no, a bicycle, I'll turn myself in. And if it's a car, I won't!"

< = >

Many sets of eyes looked down upon the street from their windows.

Since it was a lazy holiday afternoon, there were no vehicles on the road. Only pedestrians traversed the sidewalks.

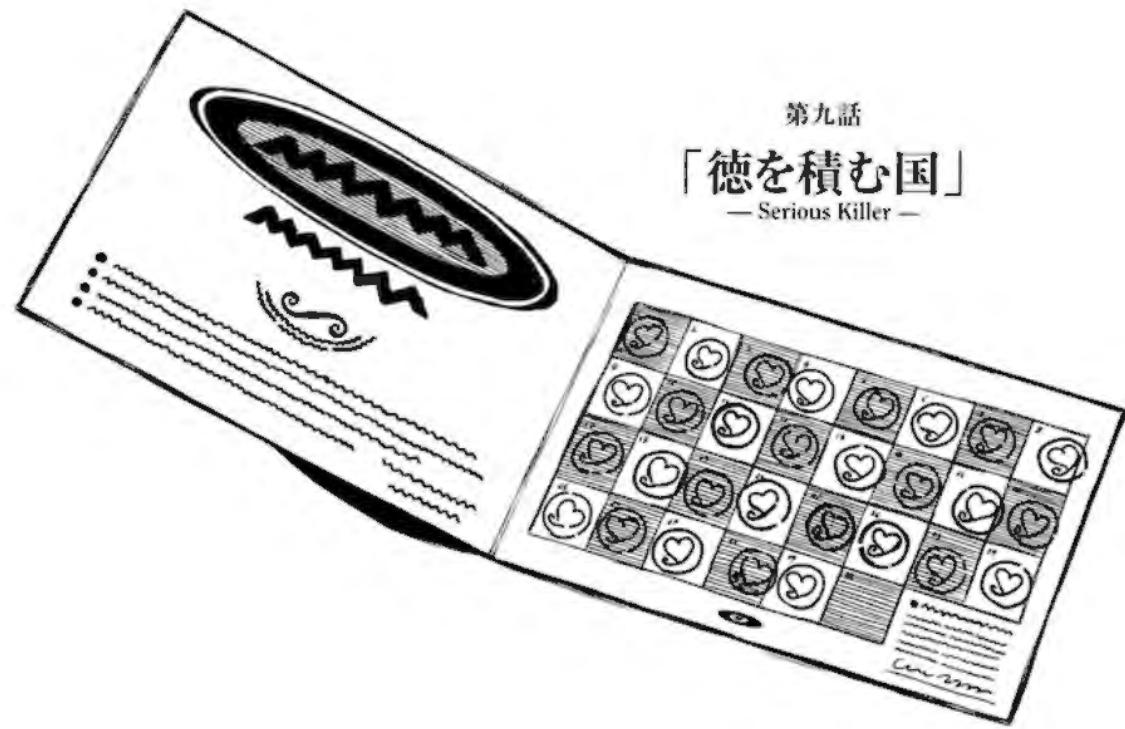
"Look at all these apartments, Kino. They're all built symmetrically. Isn't it amazing?"

"Yeah. But I think I'll remember the great turtle dish they served here more than the apartments."

Kino and Hermes passed by.

第九話

「徳を積む国」
— Serious Killer —



Chapter 9 - A Land Where Virtue is Counted
~Serious Killer~

"Oh? Ah, you must be the traveler and the motorrad that arrived two days ago."

"That's right. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kino, and this is my partner Hermes."

"Hello."

"Nice to meet you both. My name is _____. Thank you for coming to our country.
Welcome."

"Thank you."

"Thanks!"

"Seeing as your motorrad's fully loaded, and you're enjoying a nice cup of tea in the middle of the day, you must be just about getting ready to leave."

"That's right. I wanted to relax with some of this delicious tea one more time before I left."

"You're so clever, mister. Are you a detective?"

"Haha! Not at all. Just a retired old man. Now, I know you're the only one here and all the other tables are empty, but would you mind terribly if I sat with you? Lend an ear to an old man's ramblings?"

"Trying to hit on Kino? Ahaha, I can't guarantee you'll survive, mister."

"Please, go ahead. You can push Hermes aside if you'd like."

"Haha, if you'll excuse me, Hermes. Waiter, a cup of tea for me, too."

"So what are you going to tell us?"

"I wonder. How about I explain our special legal system? Has anyone told you about our 'Virtue Point' laws?"

"That's the first I've heard of it. Could you tell us more?"

"What is it? What is it?"

"Then let me tell you. In this country, whenever someone does something commendable, he or she is granted Virtue Points. It's a very strict process overseen by the government."

"Oh. So what kind of things are counted as Virtues? And how is Virtue calculated?"

"Yeah. I wanna know."

"There's a great many things you could do, but an easy example to explain would be... something like donating to a charity. If you donate money you earned for yourself to a charity, that amount is calculated as a percentage of your annual income, and you're given

Virtue Points accordingly. We use percentages because otherwise we'd be giving the rich an advantage."

"I see."

"Oh, so it's like pricing speeding tickets according to your income, right?"

"That's right. You can receive Virtue Points for all kinds of good deeds. For example, it's awarded to nationally recognized singers who show people the beauty of music through their songs. Or doctors and pharmacists who find remedies for incurable illnesses and save many people. Or scientists who create inventions that make people happy. Of course, even a small gesture like giving up your seat for an elderly person on the bus qualifies you for Virtue Points. Anyone who witnesses such an action can apply to award the person Virtue Points. And whoever does the reporting is also given a small amount of points for the good deed of bearing witness to such an action. With this system, our country assigns points to those who do good for others. That number is calculated and recorded in the person's citizenship data."

"In other words, you can easily tell who is doing good deeds for other people."

"That's about right."

"And what if someone commits a crime or does something bad to someone else? Do they lose Virtue Points?"

"Yes. For example, if you drink too much and make a huge racket at night and inconvenience other people, you would lose points. Everyone in our prisons have their Virtue Points in the negative range. Their point count is written on the identification cards they wear on their chest."

"This is just small question, but..."

"Oh, I thought the same thing, too. Don't tell me that, uh... Actually, you can go first, Kino."

"Thanks. What happens when someone who's built up a great deal of points through doing good deeds does something bad?"

"Ah, my tea is here. Give me a moment. Ah... Delicious."

"Your country has the most wonderful tea. One sip and I was hooked. I bought a great deal of tea leaves so I could enjoy this taste along my travels."

"I'm very glad to hear that. This tea was developed by a researcher who endeavored to discover the formula from a sample a merchant brought in from abroad. Ever since then, our people have been blessed with this wonderful drink. The merchant and the researcher were both awarded a great deal of Virtue Points."

"So, if a 'high-earner' like them was to commit a crime..."

"It's just as you imagine."

"So--"

"It's deducted from your point count."

"I knew it."

"I knew it."

"It's a just system. I'm sure you've heard the saying 'If a virtuous man suddenly commits a crime, the world will see him as a criminal. But if a criminal suddenly does something good, the world will see him as a virtuous man'."

"True."

"That's true."

"But that is a mistaken way of thinking. We cannot be swayed by fleeting impressions. In this country, if someone who has built up a certain amount of Virtue Points commits a crime, their sentence is reduced by an amount proportionate to their point count. Let's use that example from earlier--if a virtuous person loses control of his emotions and hits someone--"

"What happens then?"

"What happens? What happens?"

"Normally he would be arrested for assault, but he can pay up the corresponding number of points and have his record cleared. And should this exchange be acknowledged by both parties, the victim is also granted a small amount of points. For forgiving the assailant, of course."

"I see."

"Oh, I get it."

"But for the people here, losing Virtue Points is very painful. Very few people think, 'I have enough points to get away with a crime'."

"I guess."

"This is all very interesting."

"And I am very troubled."

"Pardon?"

"Huh?"

"I have spent my entire life striving to make this country a better place. When I was young, I was an inventor. I created an efficient engine with minimized emission. Then I established a company and popularized automobiles by selling excellent cars for low prices. I used my profits to sponsor research for a new drug that would cure an incurable disease. I built schools and gave less fortunate children an education. And until just last month, I was the President of this country. I may just be singing my own praises, but I believe I have made life better for many people."

"That's amazing. I bet you have a ton of points, mister."

"Yes... You're right. So very many."

"How much?"

"Enough to get away with one murder."

"..."

"Wow."

"At this moment, I am capable of paying for murder with the points I have built up. There has never been anyone in our history who has built up so many points."

"That's amazing... so is that what was troubling you?"

"Yes."

"What exactly might it be?"

"What is it? what is it?"

"I will die very soon."

"..."

"Why?"

"I am ill, you see. Our country's medical technology is extremely advanced, but there are diseases that even we cannot cure. As a matter of fact, I've snuck out of the hospital today. In just half a year, I... I will die. But that is not what troubles me. I accept my fate."

"Then?"

"Then what's troubling you?"

"You see, I... I can't think of anyone I would want to kill."

"..."

"..."

"That is what troubles me."

"Hm. So..."

"So you wanted to legally kill someone once you've built up enough points, mister?"

"That's right. And I'm out of time."

"..."

"But if there's no one you want to kill in particular, even with your points, you don't have to kill someone, right?"

"I refuse to let it end this way!"

"..."

"Why?"

"Because that would reduce all my life's efforts to nothing!"

"..."

"Huh?"

"I built up these points because I wanted to kill someone! I desperately struggled so that I would be able to commit murder! I've always looked forward to it! From my childhood, when I was first taught the system, I've dreamt of collecting enough points to get away with murder!"

"I see... I understand what you're saying."

"Traveler... Have you ever taken a life? I'm sure life on the road could not have been so easy."

"Well, yes..."

"Kino's racked up a pretty high kill count. We might not have made it otherwise."

"Then let me ask... Have you ever killed someone--not to protect yourself or another, or for pay--but out of pure enjoyment?"

"No."

"Hm... No, never."

"I see. So you could never understand..."

"Well, no."

"If it's all right, I'd like to ask. Now that I am finally capable of getting away with murder, who is it that I should kill? There is no one I hate or hold a grudge upon. All I have are loved ones--family, friends, companions--all such good people. I could never take any of their lives. But would that mean I could kill an evil person who repeatedly commits crimes? Such people are very rare, and even if I were to find one, if I was mistaken in my knowledge, I might end up doing something that could never be taken back. But if I waited for the person to be judged in a court, there would be no point in me killing them because they would be judged by the law..."

"That's true."

"Now that you mention it, yeah. I don't think Kino could help you, mister."

"Yes... You're right. At first, I-"

"You came up to me to kill me, right?"

"Yes. That's right. You're truly astounding. When I saw you, I thought, 'Perhaps I could easily kill someone not of this country'. I'm sure you've already noticed the knife I'm hiding in my clothes?'"

"Yes."

"And that's why your right hand has been on the revolver at your side all this time, correct?"

"Yes."

"There would be no point in attempting murder if I end up getting myself killed instead. I've just given up. And I am left with my troubles. Traveler, if you were in my shoes, who in this country would you kill?"

"You. After all, you're going to die very soon."

"I cannot accept that answer..."

"I know."

"Hah..."

The sound of the motorrad's engine faded into the distance.

"Whew..."

The man sat alone in the open-air cafe and looked up at the clear blue sky with a sigh.

The man paid for his tea and lightly waved at the waiter, who was looking at him with admiration. He began walking away.

He was walking on the sidewalk by a park, heading back to the hospital.

"Oh my goodness! Mr. President!"

The man turned around. A woman in her twenties was standing just outside the park, pushing a baby carriage.

"I'm retired now, ma'am. I'm no longer President." The man said sheepishly. The woman walked up to him with the baby carriage. And just like the waiter from earlier, she looked up at him with admiration.

"Sir, would you mind giving my baby a pat on the head? I want to raise him to be a great man, just like you, Mr. Pre-I mean, sir. Please, give him your blessings."

The man smiled and nodded, slowly getting to his knees and reaching down.

A tiny baby, whose head was not yet full of hair, slept soundly in the carriage.

"Of course... This baby still knows nothing of the world." He whispered, quietly enough that only the child could hear. "Absolutely nothing..."

He slowly reached out to the baby.

A gnarled hand quietly touched the infant's forehead.

The baby's mother looked on, moved to tears by the act. The man quietly spoke to the baby.

"Be happy, child. You must follow your dreams. Please. Never become a failure like me."



第十話

「雲の前で」
—Eye-opener—

Chapter 10 - Before the Clouds
~Eye-opener~

This story takes place in the mountains.

Peaks dotted with snow majestically reached into the clear blue sky.

On one gently slope of the mountains was a little stream through which flowed melting snow from the mountaintops, and a shallow pond. Bright, colorful alpine plants were growing in the area. Further down was a blanket of clouds. The ground was hidden out of sight.

A long road stretched all the way through the mountains. It was a well-maintained and wide road.

There were people between the road and the pond. There were both adults and children, about thirty in total. Beside them were three trucks laden with travel gear.

There were about ten men, led by a man in his sixties. The rest were women and children.

They were a group dressed uniformly in bright, decadent clothing, many of them grooming their hair or doing their makeup. It was a rather luxurious way of life for a group of travelers.

They smiled and laughed with one another as they went about all sorts of tasks.

It seemed that they had chosen to camp for the night at this spot. They took out tents, cushions, and folding kitchen sets from the canvas-covered trucks.

It was almost nighttime. The woman were busy setting up the large kitchen sets and preparing the dishes for the large quantity of food they were responsible for.

The eldest of the men, however, did not join the other travelers in their work. Instead, he sat perched upon a large rock as he talked with the children. The other men were keeping watch over the area, all armed with persuaders.

But among them was one person who was dressed in an entirely different manner.

It was a person in its late teens. It had unkept, messy hair, and a look a fatigue in its face.

It was wearing long grey pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a ragged pair of shoes covered in holes. Its clothes as they were could not possibly keep it warm.

It was also wearing a necklace of leather, with a lock acting as a pendant. The long, thin chain sticking out of the back of the necklace was tied to the back of one of the trucks.

"Hey, slave! Hurry up and carry this!" A young man watching the truck roared.

The slave struggled to get a heavy wooden crate off the back of the truck. It carried it away as best it could, its chain dragging behind it.

Beside it was a little girl about five years old, who chanted "Slave, slave, slower than a snail~" in a singsong voice.

"I'm sorry. I've brought the utensils." The slave said, putting down the wooden crate. The women in charge of the cooking glared at it.

"You slow, useless slave! Stay here and build a fire, do you understand? If we see you slacking off, we're going straight to the Head."

"Yes." The slave said quietly. The woman left the slave behind and scattered, baskets in hand.

Two men who were watching the area nearby, rifles slung over their shoulders, glanced at the slave as it worked hard to start a fire with coal. One of the men was young, still in his early twenties. The other was a middle-aged man in his forties.

"Why'd you think the Head decided to bring such a useless child from the last country? We've had it for ten days, but it's still terrible at work. And it's not like we even need a slave in the first place..." The young man asked.

"You were off buying supplies when we took it along, weren't you? Let me explain." The older man said.

The slave could hear their conversation clearly. The man enunciated clearly, as if daring it to listen.

"As you know, that country was a theocracy. And there's one strange rule they always live by."

"A rule?"

"The rule is 'You must always believe others'."

"What?"

"Their teachings say, 'All humans are admirable, and therefore must not be distrusted. One day they will do good for you, so you must believe in them', or something to that effect. What a foolishly idealistic way of thinking."

The younger man was still confused.

"So... Why the slave?"

"This is where it gets interesting. We were selling our goods there like we always do, but this time they didn't have quite enough to pay us. I've heard their jewel mining industry hasn't been doing so well this time. The Head demanded that they pay full price for our goods, else he would leave without selling them anything."

"I see. So they paid off the remainder with a person."

"..."

The slave listened to the men's conversation, quietly fanning the fire.

"That's right. The head of their religion just handed it over to us, saying, 'This child is an excellent helper. Please take it as your servant'. Ain't it grand to hear?"

The younger man burst into laughter.

"Pfft! Hahaha! Handing it over to us as payment without even knowing what might happen to it? Real 'admirable' of him. What a country!"

"He told us that it's an orphan. In the end he just made things up about it on the fly and got rid of a nuisance. I don't know if the Head was just having fun or humoring the man, but what's the difference? Anyway, the least they could've done for us was give us someone who can actually do some lifting. We can't even use this one as a luggage-carrier." The older man said, and looked back at the slave.

"Hey, what does our little nuisance think, now that it's been sold to us for pocket change?" He asked.

"Pretty shitty place to call a hometown, if you ask me. Don't you agree?"

But the slave did not look up at the men.

"..."

It quietly continued fanning the fire.

"Ignoring us, you brat? You've got guts, I'll give you that."

The younger man came up to the slave, grabbed the chain behind it, and violently yanked on it.

"Ack!"

The slave choked and got to its feet with a yelp.

"Say something, will you?!"

The man let go of the chain. The slave fell to its knees in tears.

"Wh-what do you want me to say...?" It whimpered. The man grinned.

"Just answer the question. What do you think of us? What do you think of the goons who sold you? I bet you hate us all."

"No..."

"Oh? And why not?"

"I must never hate anyone, no matter what happens... that is the Truth." The slave whispered, quiet but firm.

"Pfft! Ahahahaha!"

The younger man burst into laughter again.

"I don't believe this..." Even the middle-aged man could not hide his astonishment.

"Hey, you're seriously telling me you still believe that guy who sold you to us?"

"I'm sure... I'm sure that our Leader meant for me to go see the outside world." The slave replied. "Or maybe he thought this would lead me to a better life. This is a test for my future."

"..."

"..."

For a few moments, the men were struck dumb by its reply.

The older man soon snapped out of his shock and glared at the slave.

"What a hopeless idiot. Listen up, slave. Open your eyes! This isn't some dream you're having. You've been sold. You've been sold for chump change. We can hurt you and kill you, and you won't be able to do a thing about it. But you're saying you still don't hate that Leader who sold you or us, your masters? You honestly don't even think about killing us in our sleep?"

The slave shook its head. The lock and chain rattled slightly.

"No. To hate and blame others or to kill people is a sin. I've never thought that way. I mustn't..."

A new look entered the man's eyes. It was no longer cold and sharp, but tinged with sympathy.

"...Let me teach you something. You'd better listen closely. This world is hopelessly rotten to the core. People can betray, hurt, and kill other people without a second thought. Only people who don't live like humans can survive. Someone like you? Will never make it. Right now you've still got your life intact because you're our slave. But you never know if we'll change our minds. If the Head gives the order, we can kill you without even blinking. The young 'un over there can yank on your chain hard, and you'd be dead in seconds."

"No... This world is a wonderful place. I believe people can live while loving and respecting one another. One day, everyone will understand. And the world will be beautiful, full of love."

"What...?" The younger man stuttered, his mouth gaping open.

The older man frowned.

"So you really believe that's the case?"

"Yes. And if it means I can live proudly in a world like that, I'll never hate or blame or kill anyone. I'd rather die before I did. And if that happens, I'll smile at the person who kills me as I pass away. And then I'm sure the one who kills me will understand one day, too." The slave said firmly.

"This brat is hopeless. There's something wrong with its head..." The younger man said from behind the slave, not caring that it could hear.

"..."

The older man breathed a long sigh, and gave the younger man an order.

"Hey. Teach this idiot a lesson on reality. Five lashes should do the trick." He said, and returned to keeping watch over the camp.

"Yes, sir!" The younger man said. He pulled a short whip from his belt and joyfully lashed it down at the slave.

"Aaah! Urgh!"

"Now do you understand? Do you?!"

"Aack! Guh! Aahhhh!"

As the slave screamed in agony, the women returned.

"What do you think you're doing?!" They said, scolding the younger man. "Stop hitting it! It'll do even less work if it's injured! It's useless enough as it is--we'd have been beating it ages ago if we could!"

The women chased off the younger man and addressed the slave, who trembled and wept with its back covered in blood.

"Stop dawdling and stand up! Go rinse these herbs we picked, and don't waste any water! You're going to have to go draw any extra water you have to use!"

"...Yes, ma'am."

The slave got to its feet, chains rattling.

Beside one of the folding counters was a wisteria basket. It was full of freshly picked herbs.

The slave began rinsing the herbs at a bucket that was set beside it. The water had been drawn from the stream--being freshly melted snow, it was very cold to the touch. None of the women came to help.

"Quickly! At this rate, the sun's going to go down before you finish!"

"Yes, ma'am..."

The slave continued rinsing the herbs, its hands freezing red. The women diced the herbs that had been washed and tossed it all into the large pot hanging over the coals.

Suddenly,

"..."

The slave stopped washing the herbs. Its hands went still. A flash of recognition was clear in its eyes.

The slave struggled to remember something, wondering what it was that bothered it.

"..."

It tilted its head slightly, and narrowed its eyes.

And just before it could remember--

"You useless brat! I told you to keep washing! Do your work, or you'll get no dinner!" One of the women yelled.

"I-I'm sorry..." The slave said, setting aside the strange feeling in its heart as it returned to washing the herbs.

The man who had earlier whipped the slave glanced over at the scene.

"I'd never stand for living like that, if you ask me. I'd probably just shoot myself before that happens. Whaddaya know, just like the slave said. I'd choose to die instead." He said to the older man.

The older man gazed out at the great mountain range below them and the clouds that hung at eye-level.

"That slave has been defeated by fate."

"What?"

"My late grandfather would explain this to me when I was still a child. 'Humans cannot change their lives by their strength alone'. In other words, there's nothing that can change your life but pure luck. It's because we're lucky what we can live a carefree life, traveling the world making a living as merchants, but that slave never had our good fortune. But then again, it might have been better off staying in its country."

"I see." The younger man shifted the heavy rifle on his shoulder. "Anyway, I'm glad I was born into this life. I'd rather die than become a slave." He said, reiterating himself. He then continued, "If that slave wants to die so badly, I wish it'd just kill itself or something."

The older man chuckled.

"Impossible. Someone stuck in chains can't take their life so easily. Even if it tried to choke itself to death, it'll let go because of the pain. I wonder if it even knows how to take its own life."

"Ah, right. So it can't live or die. Sucks being unfortunate."

"That's the way things are." The older man said.

"Thanks for that lesson from your grandfather. Any other words of wisdom from him you might like to share?"

"Sure, how about this?"

"Yes?"

The older man smirked.

"Eat your vegetables."

Once the slave had finished rinsing the herbs, it was ordered to start a coal fire.

The women worked on their dinner, expertly adding in the herbs they picked, along with carrots, potatoes, and smoked meat from the trucks. They boiled all the ingredients in the pot, then seasoned the mixture with spices. A scrumptious smell soon rose into the air.

The slave continued adding coals to the flame, its hands black with soot and sweat running down its cheeks.

"What do you think'd happen if we spilled this whole pot over that filthy slave?"

"I bet it'll start crying like an animal with that disgusting voice. Sounds like fun."

"I'd really love to try... But it wouldn't do to waste food."

The women chattered cheerfully.

Dinner was ready.

The meal began before sunset.

Dinner was announced to the entire camp. All its members, save for several men standing guard, gathered together and took their seats, sitting down on their own cushions laid on stones.

Naturally, at the centre of the gathering was the 60-something year-old Head. On his right side sat a younger wife, a woman in her forties, and a boy about ten years of age.

Deep wooden plates filled with soup, as well as wooden spoons, were placed before each seat. The same meal was also delivered to the men standing guard in the distance.

"..."

The slave looked on at the scene, washing its hands in the cold water from the stream.

When it finished washing its hands, the slave took a seat a slight distance from the travelers. A stone-faced woman walked up to it.

"Remember you're only being allowed to eat because you've worked harder than the rest of us. I expect you to get back to work as soon as you're finished."

The woman gave the slave a tiny plate of soup and a broken spoon, then turned away in a huff.

The food had been distributed, but the meal had not yet begun.

"Let us now life up a word of prayer to mother nature." The Head said, bowing his head and muttering quietly. Everyone but the men on guard bowed their heads in silent prayer.

"..."

The slave sat on a hard rock, alone in the distance, waiting for the travelers to finish praying.

It caught sight of something in the distance--little plants dancing in the wind. It was the same herb it had rinsed for the meal earlier. The wind rose up from behind the rock the Head sat upon, and animated the little green leaves to look as though they were dancing.

And,

"Ah..."

It was as though a button had been pushed. The slave remembered something it had not been able to think of before.

"Ah... Ah..."

It breathed through its mouth as it slowly looked down at the plate of soup before it.

Warm steam was rising from it. Inside the broth was the herb it had rinsed, cooked to perfection and mixed in with the carrots and potatoes, highlighting the mixture with streaks of green.

"This is... Poison."

No one could hear the slave's whisper.

It remembered something its grandmother had told it when it was young.

"Listen well, child. This herb tastes magnificent, but you must never pick them in high places where the clouds rest. The ones that grow up high are very poisonous, so you can't boil them like you do with every other herb. In just half an hour you'll turn green, start foaming at the mouth, and pass away."

The slave could clearly remember her warning.

"Oh... Oh..."

The tears falling from the slave's face began to wash the soot from its face. Through the tears it could see the Head looking up again, his prayer finished.

"Then let us begin the meal!"

It could hear the Head's call. It could hear the sound of plates being picked up.

Soon they would begin their meal.

If the slave didn't say anything, the travelers would feast on the soup and die.

Then the slave could be free. But it would also be an act of leaving them to die.

They would soon step past the point of no return.

But it was not too late.

'You mustn't eat.'

The slave thought, as it took a deep breath to warn the travelers.

And,

"..."

Objectively, it was but a single second. For a single second the breath that should have become a voice stopped in its tracks.

"Ah-"

And so, it was too late.

"Thank you for the meal!"

The hungry travelers dug into their meal. The slave could clearly hear them happily slurping and gulping down their food.

"Excellent as usual!"

It could also hear voices.

"Ah..."

Tears began running down its cheeks.

"No... Why... Why... How could this happen..."

The tears would not stop. The slave continued mumbling to itself in disbelief.

"I... I as good as killed... I... I'm a murderer..."

The slave's eyes wandered onto the dish placed in front of it.

"..."

It could clearly see the splotches of green in its meagre portion.

"That's right... If it means I'm going to live as a murderer... I'd rather..."

The slave smiled through its tears as it slowly reached both hands to the plate.

"I will... Follow..."

It gripped the plate in its hands and brought it to its mouth.

"Ah..."

The slave opened its mouth to drink down the soup.

A rock flew at it.

A small rock flew into its face.

"Ah!"

The shock and pain caused its to lose its grip. The plate fell, hit a jutting stone, and spilled its contents over the ground.

"Bull's eye!" The Head's son cheered. Although everyone was busy bringing their soup to their mouths, the boy alone was standing. He flicked the finger that had sent the rock flying at the slave.

"Did you see that, everyone? Wasn't that great?"

As the slave sat curled up in pain, the Head's son began chattering under the confused gaze of his fellow travelers.

"Why d'you think I did that? I saw it! I saw that filthy slave try to drink the soup like a pig, without even using a spoon! That's bad manners!" He looked around at the adults beside him.

"That's why I threw the rock at it! A barbarian shouldn't get to have dinner! Right, Mother? Father?"

"You're absolutely right, son."

"I'm so proud of you."

The Head and his wife replied promptly. The others voiced their agreement.

"That's the young master for you."

"Serves it right. You don't deserve to eat if you can't keep simple table manners."

"Hm..."

The men who were standing on guard returned to their food, having earlier turned towards the commotion when they heard the slave's scream.

The slave cradled its head in its hands and looked up.

"Ah..."

Before its eyes was its plate of soup, completely spilled over the ground, the sight of the Head's son looking down at it condescendingly, and the travelers returning to their meal.

"All right! I'm going to eat now, too!" The boy said loudly, noticing the slave's gaze. He lifted his plate and spoon.

"No! Young master! You mustn't eat! You mustn't!"

The Head's son was surprised by the slave's sudden screaming. His hands stopped midway.

"...Wh-what? Someone make it be quiet." The boy said. A man sitting close by put down his plate and spoon, then whipped a rock in the slave's direction. It was the size of a child's fist.

"Please, stop! That herb! It's po-"

The rock made its mark and hit the slave in the forehead before it could say that the herb was poisonous. Its skin was torn. Blood splattered over the earth.

"Urgh...!"

The slave screamed and fell limp, powerlessly landing on the ground. Blood trailed down from its forehead.

The man who threw the rock rushed over to the slave, forced its head upwards, and used a bandanna to fashion a gag.

"Stop trying to interrupt our dinner, you barbarian! Keep your mouth shut!"

He tightly tied the bandanna behind the slave's head. He then used another bandanna to tie the slave's hands behind its back.

By the time the man had returned to his meal, the slave regained its senses.

"Mmmmmph! Mmmph!"

It raised its head and screamed desperately, blood flowing from its forehead, but no one could understand what it was trying to say.

"What is that barbarian doing? It's driving me crazy." The Head's son said, elegantly bringing a spoonful of soup to his mouth. One. Two. Three spoonfuls. Green leaves went from the spoon into his mouth.

"Mmmph! Mmmmmph!"

The slave screamed, weeping. Everyone, even the guards could hear its cries, but no one listened to it.

"MMMMMMMPH! HHHHMMMPH!"

It started sounding vaguely human, but no one could understand.

"Mmph..."

The slave went quiet, no longer having any strength to scream.

Everyone enjoyed their meal, ignoring the slave. The Head's son suddenly spoke to his father.

"Father, I have a request."

The Head stopped mid-meal and looked at his son kindly.

"What are you going to do with that slave, Father? Surely we won't take it along all the way?"

The Head's son was evidently not the only one interested in the topic. The others all turned to the Head.

The Head thought for a moment.

"I suppose we can't let this go on forever. I think it'd be best to sell it off in the next country. Although I doubt it'll sell for very much."

"Then, Father!" The Head's son chirped. "Would you sell it to me for a cheap price? I've saved up my allowance. I'm sure I can pay for it!"

"Ah. So what do you plan to do with that slave? Son, a slave is tiresome to travel with. It must be fed if you want to take it along." The Head said. His son looked him straight in the eye.

"I will not do such a thing, Father. I am going to kill that slave."

Even the slave, tired out from the screaming, could hear the boy's words clearly.

"Oh? Kill it, you say?" The Head said, pleasantly surprised.

"That's right, Father! I'm not a child anymore. I can't just remain behind the protection of others. I want to become a strong man who can fight, and protect you and Mother and everyone else. I don't want to become someone who is too weak to take a life. So once you sell that slave to me, I will torment it, shot its arms and legs, then slit its belly open! So please, Father!"

The boy waited with bated breath as his father fell into thought.

"All right."

"R-really?"

"Of course, my boy. A man never goes back on his word. I thought you were still a child, but it looks like you've grown into a fine young man. So taking that slave really was worth something after all." The Head said. His wife agreed with a smile.

"Thank you, Father!" His son said, beaming.

"We're counting on you, young master!"

"One of these days we'll put everything on your shoulders!" The men joked.

The entire camp burst into laughter.

At that very moment, the slave broke its silence.

It unmistakably let out a human voice. A voice muted by the gag in its mouth.

But--

It sounded almost like a wolf howling into the distance. The slave knelt on the ground, looking ahead, and screamed with its eyes wide open, spewing blood and fluids all over. It screamed and screamed.

Its voice echoed across the mountains and disturbed the ears of everyone but itself.

"Wh-what the heck? Someone stop that thing! Disgusting!" Someone said. A young man quickly ran up to the slave.

"AAAAAAHHHHH--"

He kicked the slave in the gut.

"Guh!"

The slave lost consciousness and went silent.

Things were suddenly quiet again.

The travelers were struck by the dreadful sound.

"What the heck was that...?"

"You can't even call it human..."

"It's an animal!"

"Just kill it already!"

They opened their mouths one by one.

"Settle down, everyone. It may be a mindless creature that does not understand its surroundings, but knowing that it will die soon must have driven it insane. It's useless as a slave, in any event. It doesn't matter." The Head declared. The travelers calmed down.

"Now, let me say this again. I will be handing that slave over to my son tomorrow. Are they any objections?"

Naturally, there was none. No one spoke up.

"Thank you, Father!" The boy said.

After dinner, the pot of soup had just about one plateful left.

"Anyone want seconds?" A middle-aged woman asked. No one answered.

"Then back to nature it goes!" The woman said, and spilled the remaining contents onto the earth.

The sun began falling towards the horizon. It was nearly dusk.

The guards switched shifts, the dishes were washed, and the women began to brew tea they could drink before bedtime.

The man who had tied up the slave took off the bandannas from its ankles and mouth.

"Uhhh..."

He grimaced at the bandanna, stained with blood and saliva.

"What do we do with the slave?" He asked.

"It's the young master's slave now, so why don't we ask him?" One of the women replied, then turned to the Head's son, who had been passing by.

"What should we do, young master? Do you want us to feed it before you kill it?"

"No. Don't let it eat anything but water from now on. I heard that it'll stink if it's still got food in its belly." The boy laughed.

It was a little later that the slave opened its eyes.

"..."

The first thing it saw was the bright evening sun and the mass of clouds covering the sky.

And the first thing it heard--or rather, what it heard before opening its eyes--

"ARGH!"

"Ahhh! Someone help me! Please!"

"It hurts! It hurts!"

"Gah..."

"My stomach! It's too painful!"

"Koff! Blargh!"

"AAAAAHHHHHH!"

It was a symphony of shrieks, with about thirty people acting as the instruments.

The slave slowly raised its head.

"Oh..."

Before its eyes was the sight of hell itself.

People were writhing in pain as though in a dance, spewing white foam from their mouths. The foam looked orange under the light of dusk.

Some were lying on the ground, unmoving.

One stuck his head in the creek, but never came up again.

One clutched her belly in agony and rolled on the ground, not caring that rocks were tearing at her flesh.

Another lay on the ground with his arms and legs in the air, fingers and toes twitching.

One person who seemed to have been in better shape desperately tried to throw up what he had eaten.

Others desperately tried to revive the collapsed Head, while succumbing to the poison themselves.

A woman holding a child foaming at the mouth, while spewing foam herself.

Another person muttered to himself, trying to convince himself that it was all a nightmare by slapping himself on the cheeks.

Yet another person clutched a first-aid kit and downed all the medication she could get her hands on.

"..."

The slave lay on the ground and watched in shock.

But the pandemonium did not last long.

The people fell to the ground, one by one, and began twitching with the last of their strength. Soon they grew faint.

And they would never move again.

By the time the evening sun approached the horizon, the slave could hear nothing.

"..."

It slowly got to its feet. Its forehead was no longer bleeding.

Dried blood was caked over its head. With its face covered in brownish red, and with no discernible expression on its face, the slave approached the people with its chain trailing behind it.

"..."

The slave came across the Head's wife and son, crumpled together on the ground. Their faces were obscured by the white foam.

It found the Head's body a short distance away. The men who had been standing guard were collapsed there as well.

Other guard were collapsed in between their posts and the camp, perhaps in an attempt to return.

The slave shifted, and the chain at its neck rattled in under the twilight.

"Urgh..."

It heard someone's voice.

"Oh!"

The slave hurriedly looked around.

"Where are you? Answer me!"

"Argh..."

It approached the owner of the voice--a man laying collapsed on the ground--and crouched beside him.

The man was still alive. His eyes were closed, but what dribbled form his mouth was not foam but saliva. His chest was slowly rising and falling.

He was the middle-aged man who had spoken to the slave as it tried to start the coal fire.

"P-please, wake up..." The slave said, and shook the man's shoulders. His eyes opened.

"Please... get up..."

With the slave's help, the man sat upright. He spat unpleasantly and looked at the slave, sitting to his right.

"..."

He slowly looked around, taking in the sight of the corpses of his companions. He turned back to the slave.

"Wh... What happened?" He asked weakly.

"Th-those herbs... The kind that grows in this area are poisonous. I... I didn't remember quickly enough, and... because of me..."

The man understood the situation instantly.

"I see... I... I never liked vegetables... Good thing I was picky, eh...?"

And,

"Is... Is anyone still alive...?"

The man asked feebly, looking for survivors. No one answered.

"It's just you... you're the only one..."

"But... I don't have long... do I?"

"..."

The slave was silent.

"Looks like that's it, then... Because... you never had a bite... no..." The man mumbled. He then remembered.

"No...! You... you tried to eat your portion..."

"Yes! I only realized just before everyone started eating. But I never warned them .I never said a thing! I'm a terrible human being! For a second, I thought, 'I don't care if they die'! I couldn't save them! They're all dead because of me! I tried to die with them because I didn't want to live on as a murderer!" The slave cried, its tears slowly washing the blood off its cheeks.

"...I see." The man smiled faintly.

"I'm the only one left now. So please, sir... Please at least give me one thing..."

"Yeah...?"

"Please, kill me."

"What?"

"Please... Please kill me!"

"Oh... I see. All right..."

The man lay on the ground and looked around. On his left he caught sight of the rifle he had been carrying over his shoulder until not too long ago. The man reached out and weakly pulled on the shoulder strap, and pulled the persuader onto his body with great difficulty. He then undid the safety.

"I... can't. I don't have the strength... You're gonna have to hold it..." He said to the slave.

The slave knelt before him and clumsily took hold of the rifle.

"Wh-what do I do? I don't know how to use it..."

"I'll show you... But before that..."

The man reached into his pocket and took out a small key.

"Come closer... Yeah. Don't move."

The man reached out to the slave with his right hand and opened the lock at its neck.

The lock fell in front of the slave. Its necklace and chain slid down its back. The sound of clattering broke the silence.

"There... Now it'll be easy to shoot... First. hold up the muzzle with your left hand..."

"Like this...?"

"Yeah... Now take the thinnest section with your right hand... Yes... Your index finger... on the trigger... Don't lose your grip, now... Keep your hand steady... Koff!"

White foam came spewing out of his mouth before he could finish.

"Eek!"

"Calm down... I'm not dead yet... Now, lift it up. Easy does it..."

"L-like this...?"

The slave lifted the rifle with its thin arms. The barrel pointed into the air.

"Ah... yes. Perfect...!"

At that very moment, the man used the last of his strength to sit up suddenly.

"Ack!"

The slave screamed in fright, just as the man took hold of the barrel with both hands. He quickly pulled the barrel lower, pointing the gun towards his own stomach.

The moment the man pulled the rifle towards him, the trigger was pulled by the slave's finger.

Bang.

A powerful impact shook them both. The sound of the gunshot echoed through the camp and rang out into the mountains.

The bullet struck the man's stomach, destroyed his organs, shot out his back, and hit the ground.

The slave lost its grip on the rifle because of the recoil.

"Eek!" It screamed.

"Koff!"

The man did not cough up foam, but blood.

He slowly fell over to his right. His head hit a stone with a thud.

"...Wh-why...?"

The slave knelt before the man, its eyes wide and full of tears.

"Just like you said... you'll understand one day..." The man answered.

He closed his eyes and passed away with a smile.

The sun was setting past the horizon.

On the mountainside were about thirty corpses, a slave who was no longer a slave, and three trucks.

"..."

The slave was now truly alone. It stood stock still beside the bleeding corpse, its face covered in tears and dried blood.

"That was amazing! Everyone's dead. You're a smart one, aren't you?" Someone said.

It was a clear, elegant voice, but the tone was reminiscent of that of a delinquent teenager.

"..."

The slave stood in silence. About three seconds passed after the voice had spoken.

"Huh?" It finally looked up. "Wh-who's there?"

"Finally. You have to speed up a bit! Over here! Hurry up!"

The voice was coming from one of the trucks parked in a row.

"Are you all right? Are you still alive?!"

The slave broke out running. It stumbled many times before it managed to run up to the three trucks parked by the road.

"Where are you?"

"Over here! Quick!"

It followed the voice to the truck at the very end.

The back of the truck was covered by a canvas. On either side were clear vinyl windows, and at the front was a hole used as a doorway.

"Come in! I hate it when people keep me waiting." The voice said to the slave, who stood hesitating at the opening.

"But... I was ordered not to go inside the trucks carrying their goods..."

"Don't be stupid! They're all dead now."

"Oh..."

The slave thought of a possibility.

"Are you a slave too? You must be locked up in there, right?" It asked.

"No way! Quit dawdling. Come on inside!"

"..."

The sun had nearly set.

The slave made up its mind. It climbed onto the back of the truck, and entered through the opening in the canvas. Light spilled in from the vinyl window on the west, faintly illuminating the interior.

The slave's eyes soon adjusted to the darkness. It looked around.

The back of the truck was filled with narrow shelves made of metal piping. All kinds of sundry goods were arranged on them, bought by the traveling merchants. They were all secured with ropes so they would not fall off during the drive.

The slave avoided the shelves and stepped further inside. It was just about at the middle of the space, near the vinyl window.

"Where are you?"

"Over here!" Someone answered from right at its feet.

"Eek!" The slave recoiled and hit its back on a shelf behind it. The shelf shook loudly.

"What're you getting scared for? We were talking just fine a second ago, right?"

"..."

The slave tentatively looked down at its feet.

In front of it was a narrow shelf in the corner. Several wooden boxes were stacked atop it, and--

"Yeah! Over here!"

It was the delinquent-sounding motorrad that had been raising its voice for some time.

The motorrad was small. Its wheels were about the size of platters, and the chassis was about as big as a bench made for children. There were no handles to be found, and it had almost no protruding parts. In fact, the chassis almost looked like a box.

The little motorrad had been stuffed under the shelf and secured with rope.

"Huh...? Huh? What...?"

As the slave gaped in shock, the motorrad continued without a care in the world.

"What are you, a fish? Aren't you supposed to be human? Never seen a motorrad before, or something? Just to warn you, if you ask me, 'how do you talk', I'll beat you to a pulp. And if you ask me where my mouth is, I'll kick you."

"...Um... How...?" The slave began.

"Ha! Good question! You look a bit slow, but you're actually pretty bright, right? That's good! Otherwise it wouldn't be any fun!"

"...Is no one else here...?"

"Nope! They're all dead! That's right, they're dead. I heard everything! I heard you talking to the guard, I heard the guy whip you, I heard that delusional cheeky brat, I heard them scream, I heard you talking to the guard, and I heard the gunshot right afterwards!"

"..."

"They're all dead. Everyone's dead. Everyone's gone. Kaput. Kicked the bucket! Except for you."

"..."

"Hey! don't make that face. You're free now. You can do whatever you want now, Missy."

The sun had set. The world quickly lost its colour.

The interior of the truck quickly grew dark. It was impossible to discern the expression of the girl who had once been a slave.

Only her voice carried clear in the darkness.

"I... I... I killed them..."

"Don't be stupid. That last one killed himself. And the rest of 'em should have known better than to use poison for cooking."

"But... But if only I'd told them!"

"Then you think they would've stopped eating? Fat chance! They'd have kept going no matter who tried to warn them. All you'd get in return was a whipping. Am I wrong? You even tried to save that brat, but what did you get in return? Thanks and gratitude? Is that scar on your forehead a thank-you kiss or something?"

"They just had no luck to begin with. They would have died here tonight, whether you were around nor not. And you were lucky. Isn't it amazing? You're free now!"

"..."

"Didn't you hear me? I said, you're free!"

"..."

"Hello?"

"Please... Tell me."

"Yeah, what is it?"

"How do I die?"

"That's simple! You just live. All living creatures die eventually."

"I see... I have to live... until I figure out how to die..."

"That's right. Just keep going, and your life will end before you know it. That's when death happens."

"I get it. So that's all I can do... That's all..."

"Besides, it's better for me that you live, too. Otherwise I'd be stuck here forever! It's really uncomfortable being folded up like this. I mean, we're by the road, so I'm sure someone's gonna come by us eventually, but maybe not. So I need to ask you a favor."

"Huh? What is it?"

"We're saying goodbye to this place! I'll teach you how to drive a truck. This one is an automatic, so it's just a matter of getting used to the controls. But before that, don't forget to carry over all the valuables over here from the other trucks. We can sell persuaders and ammunition, so go collect them from the corpses. Accessories too! And pick out some nice clothes from the trucks and change into something else. No one's gonna complain!"

"...And?" The girl asked.

"'And'? Then we leave together! You can't go back home now, can you? Oh! I forgot! Actually, I have a really awesome name. From now on, you'll call me by that, okay? And what's your name? It's polite to introduce yourself first, so I'll give you the honors." The motorrad said cheerfully.

"I don't have one." The girl replied firmly, her expression veiled by the shadows.

"What?"

"I don't have a name. Not anymore."

The motorrad was quiet for four seconds.

"In that case... I guess I'll have to make you one. Uh... But I can't really think of anything on the spot. How about I give you a name once I think up something nice?"

"Okay."

"Great! It's only right you name someone who's just been born!"

The next afternoon.

A motorrad arrived at a mountain range, where two trucks and about thirty corpses lay scattered on the ground.

Travel gear was packed on either side of its rear wheel and atop it.

The rider, wearing a brown coat, noticed the trucks and the corpses ahead of them and stopped the motorrad.

The rider took out a sniping scope from a box, hid behind a boulder a slight distance from the motorrad, and quietly looked at the scene.

"What do you see?" The motorrad asked.

"No one's moving." The rider replied honestly.



プロローグ

「幸せの中で・b」

—Birth・b—

Epilogue - In Happiness - a
~Birth -a~

Kino and Hermes were visiting a very scientifically advanced country.

Skyscrapers towered over every stretch of land, and automated vehicles silently drove through the floating streets.

"...You mean, a 'city of the future a kid might imagine'?"

"Yeah, that's it!"

"That was hard to figure out... But it seems pretty appropriate."

Kino and Hermes rode through the city, loudly spouting exhaust behind them. And soon,

"We're here."

"Here it is."

They arrived at a large building.

It was a white building with no windows. It looked like a large warehouse, or some sort of a domed stadium. Security cameras and automated security systems equipped with persuaders looked down at them intimidatingly.

"Kino, Hermes! Welcome to the Centre. We've been waiting for you."

A door opened, and a man stepped out to greet them. Kino and Hermes greeted him back, and were led into the building.

Kino pushed Hermes along as they walked down a wide hallway.

"How much have you been told so far?" The man asked.

"I've only heard that there was an excellent facility called the Centre, which is responsible for helping people live longer lives, and that I should pay it a visit." Kino answered.

"I see! Then I suppose it would be easiest to show you everything." The man said. He stopped at a door marked 'Authorized Personnel Only', and entered a code into a numeric keypad.

The door slid open. Beyond it was something resembling a suspended gallery. The hallway, made entirely of reinforced glass, stretched from one end of the building to the other from near the top of its interior.

Kino and Hermes followed the man through the corridor.

Dim orange lights were illuminating the area. At the very bottom of the building were countless bottles packed together like sardines.

They looked rather small from Kino and Hermes' vantage point, but they were in fact large enough to fit a person inside.

"Ah..."

In fact, each bottle did indeed contain a person.

Men, women, children, and elders of all ages floated in the bottles, completely naked and hooked up to tubes and electrodes. Once in a while one of their limbs would move.

"Magnificent, don't you agree?" The man asked. Hermes agreed excitedly.

"I understand what is in this building. But what-no, who are they?" Kino asked.

"They are our Spares."

"Spares'?"

"That's correct. Take, for example, that revolver you're carrying." The man pointed at the holster at Kino's right side. "The cylinder is used to hold gunpowder and ammunition, correct? And what would happen if you used it so much that cracks began to form on it?"

"It's time for a switch!"

Answering the question was not Kino, but Hermes. Kino agreed.

"Of course. I would be scared that it might explode when I open fire. And since I can't make repairs to the cylinder, I carry around extras in case I need to exchange it."

The man nodded satisfactorily.

"Naturally. In much the same way, think of this place as a safeguard for our people's spare parts. People's bodies, like persuaders, can break down due to accident, illness, or age. When such a thing happens, we transplant parts from this place into their bodies."

"Does that mean that the people here were brought in to become parts for the citizens?"

The man shook his head.

"Not at all. That would be considered kidnapping."

"Then..."

"They have been born for this very purpose."

"There is an unspoken rule in this country that states that each couple is allowed to have no more than two children. Any more than that, and it would make things difficult for us in the long term. We would not be able to handle the population growth. But it is not outright forbidden to raise three or more children. And some people, in fact, do so." The man explained. "However, even if they do not plan to raise three or more children, most couples have three, four children. I'm sure you understand why."

"...So they could be stored as Spares here..."

"Exactly! Every citizen in this country has a sibling of sorts here. After all, transplants and transfusions between blood relatives have a much lower risk of rejection. And what rejections do occur can be more easily suppressed than otherwise. It's similar to taking parts to use for your persuader from another persuader of a similar model."

"I see..."

"Most of such siblings are brought here at birth. They are raised in these bottles, though of course they have no mental capacity. We provide them with nutrition essential for growth, and use electrical signals to stimulate their muscles. We maintain their bodies in top condition so that they could be used at any time. Have a look at number 987 over there."

Kino looked at the bottle marked with the number. The middle-aged man floating there was missing his legs from his thighs down.

"His legs were transplanted to his older brother, who lost his own in an accident. I coordinated the transplant myself. The older brother has made a full recovery and is able to walk again. Now, if I could turn your attention to number 323..."

There was no one inside the bottle of that number. Empty tubes floated gently in the water.

"Her older sister just passed away of old age this morning. Her role was finished, so she has been removed, naturally."

"What happens in cases like this? Do you just toss them out somewhere?" Hermes asked.

"Not at all. Spares are cremated and buried together."

The tour came to an end.

"Kino, Hermes. If possible, please explain this wonderful system of ours to other countries you visit in the future. We would be happy to share our technology with the rest of the world! There would be nothing more satisfying than bringing happiness to others." The man said as he said goodbye.

Kino and Hermes thanked the man and left the Centre. They started along the long, smooth street stretching out before them.

And so--

Afterword

~Preface~

Hello, everyone. This is Sigsawa, the writer of this book.

You! Are you disappointed that this afterword started out looking so plain? Yes, I'm talking to you!

Not to worry, dear reader. This may look like an ordinary afterword, but there will be nothing ordinary about its length. Just to warn you, this Afterword is a whopping seven pages long. That's about as long as some short stories. Is it really all right to use up so much space? Well, I guess it must be, since the editorial department said it is. I can't stop now!

In any case, there are no spoilers for the book in this afterword. You can rest easy and read this before starting on the book itself. This is the Sigsawa Quality.

Kino's Journey has finally reached its twelfth volume.

I have no words to describe this feeling of accomplishment. The number twelve holds a special significance in my heart.

This might seem a bit random, but I always considered multiples of three a conclusive number for a series of stories. Kino's Journey had volumes 1~3, 4~6, and 7~9. Movies like Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, and Mobile Suit Gundam were all completed within three films. My other works, [Allison] and [Lilia and Treize] also ended in multiples of three for that same reason.

And that was why when I wrote Kino's Journey 3 (Published January 2001, for your information), I thought that I would end things there. I was incredibly happy to have been able to come so far with a work that was originally just a submission.

That was why the last story in that volume was titled [A Finished Tale]. It was quite a conclusive name.

But thanks to your warm reception, my books sold very well, and the editorial department gave me the green light to keep writing more. Actually, it was more like they asked me to. In fact, it was more like 'Hurry up and write more'. Anyway, the editorial department's attitude encouraged me to continue.

"Then it's up to volume 6 I go! In other words, Season 2!" (Volume 6 was published in August 2002.)

"I can write more?! Then volume 9 it is! Three times three! This is beautiful!" (Volume 9 was published in October 2005.)

Time passed, and I've reached the fourth stop with volume 12.

In other words, this is the end of Kino's Journey! The final volume!

AS IF.

I'd like to keep writing as much as I can from now on.

And just now, when I typed out the word "final volume" and converted it to kanji, I received the characters for "re-imprisoned" instead¹. That was quite a shock. What a terrifying thought.

In any case, I have no idea how much further I can take this story, but now that I've come this far, I'd like to keep trying as much as possible. I still haven't gotten to the Stock Market Arc, either. Gakuen Kino ended up coming out first... (See volume 4's afterword for details.)

Now, I'd like to talk about the work that goes into making Kino's Journey.

I've written something similar to this in volume 11, but to be frank, this is something like a 'normal afterword'.

I think I just realized that I've been thirsting for a normal afterword for a while now. Although I guess I'm reaping what I sowed.

In volume 11, I discussed things about the title, typos, jargon, character/weapon names, belongings, and fan work. This time, I'll be talking about something different so it doesn't overlap.

That is--the process of completing one book.

This Dengeki Bunko book you're reading is made through a very long process and passes through many hands along the way. I'd like to talk about my part in that process--a timeline I usually work by.

There are two things you should keep in mind before reading.

First, the following process may differ greatly between individual authors, departments, and publishing companies.

Second, I've intentionally left out things relating to the illustration process. I'm very sorry about that.

Step 1: Handing in a plot outline

I am a professional author who lives off royalties, so I have to write books. If I don't get royalties, I can't feed myself. So let's start things off.

¹ The words "final volume" and "re-imprisoned" are pronounced the same way.

First, I create a plot outline of the next piece I want to write and hand it in to my editor. That's where it all starts. In terms of a regular office, think of it as a project proposal.

Of course, I could just as well write an entire volume's worth of stories and have my editor read it then, but if the story is rejected, it will mean I have wasted an enormous amount of time.

No author would do something like that unless they could write a book in the blink of an eye or have a backlog of books they've written. But in my case, I never do that. I don't want to end up with regrets like "I should have used that time to write another story".

There's no given format in which an author has to convey the plot outlines. In other words, all I have to do is make sure my editor understands what I'm trying to say. I could walk into the editorial office and say, "I want to write a story like this!", or I could type one out and email it to my editor. Sometimes I hand in multiple plot outlines at once.

The summaries themselves have no set format, either.

It's possible to simply say, "A story with this kind of feel", or go into lengthy detail about characterization and plot points.

Personally, I don't start writing out a story until I've decided on an ending for it, so I always hand in the latter type.

It's beneficial for both the author and the publishing company for a work to become a multi-volume series. Sometimes I come up with stories that can be neatly finished in one volume, but in most cases, I also think of ways I can continue the story in a serialized format.

If I'm working on an already existing project like [Kino's Journey] or [Meg and Sellon], I send in an outline describing only the contents of the story.

And once the editorial department gives me the go-ahead, I begin writing.

This is around the point where we decide on my deadline for this story and the publishing date. After all, if an author had forever to write a story, he'd never get anything done.

Deadlines are what keep authors moving forward.

Step 2: Writing

I begin writing.

This is probably the most self-explanatory part of the process.

An author who has a plot outline works along it (sometimes making corrections and alterations), and others weave complicated stories on the spot.

Of course, it's almost unheard of for an author to just write a story as fast as he can type. It's a long, long battle with your own self.

To all you authors in the world (including myself), don't give up! May the grace of the God of Novels be with you always.

Yes, I'm done! On to the next step.

Step 3: Editorial pass and meeting with the editor

Even when I've finished writing, at this stage it's all still in the rough draft stage. These drafts are called 'first drafts', and I hand them in to the editorial department for their approval.

I'm very nervous during the time between handing in the draft and getting an answer back. If they tell me, "Boring. Rejected!", then I can feel my eyes go dim.

But if that happened at this stage, I couldn't continue this afterward. So let's assume the first draft was received with the empowering magic words "It's great!".

But that doesn't mean "Then you're all set! Thanks for your work on the story!". If anyone receives an answer like that, I would give them my utmost respect. Please teach me your secret.

Normally, the editorial department gives me questions and points out corrections that have to be made.

These could range from honest mistakes to awkward phrasing to things like "I don't understand what happened here", "The characterization could have been better", "Please add/remove this scene", or "Please cut down on your obsessive firearms expositions".

Then comes the meeting. I discuss the story with my editor, and sometimes we go all-out and toss around ideas, making a list of things to fix.

I've heard that authors who live far away tend to have their meetings over the phone, but I personally prefer to have my meetings in person, so I go to the editorial department myself.

When it comes to longer stories and stories that have received a lot of comments about things to fix, one meeting can take hours. For example, we could start at 3 in the afternoon and finish at 9 in the evening.

Before, I used to print out my manuscripts and make notes on them with a red pen, but these days I usually take my laptop along and make edits on the spot. The reason is simple--I sometimes can't read my own red writing.

This new draft is labelled the 'second draft'. I make corrections and reread the story at the same time, fixing up sentences, adding in scenes, or taking them out.

Sometimes I re-submit this second draft for another editorial pass and go through a third draft, but if the deadline is just ahead, that's not always an option.

After all, normally by this time I would have long missed the deadline we set for me at the beginning.

Step 4: Completion

Along with the words "reprint" (the books are selling so well we're printing more copies) and "royalties", this is one of the most beautiful words that could ever exist in an author's life. That much is certain.

In other words, this is the process of sending in the manuscript to be printed.

Each time I enter this stage, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I don't need to be afraid of looking at clocks and calendars anymore. I don't jump when the phone starts ringing. It's a time when an author regains his humanity.

For your information, I've experienced this stage twenty-seven times, including with this very volume. But each time I reach this stage, I treat myself to delicious food. Usually that means conveyor belt sushi. After all, it doesn't look quite as sad even if you're eating alone.

As another aside, I usually end up catching a cold after this stage and lying in bed sick for two days. Maybe my body's just allowing itself to relax again. Or maybe it's the sushi. (I certainly hope not.)

Step 5: First proof printing, copy editing, author's revisions

First proof printing:

The manuscript is sent to the printing house, and printed out on sheets of A4-sized paper, in the same layout and format as the Dengeki Bunko volumes. This version is called the "first proof".

Author's revisions:

The first proof is photocopied, and sent to me under the name "photocopy of first proof". And as the author, I read it over again and dedicate myself to making edits. (This manuscript is also called an "author's revision copy".)

And as I read the manuscript again, I reread sentences I thought were perfectly fine when I first wrote them, but then realize are extremely awkward.

"Who the hell wrote this? Oh, wait. It was me."

I shake my head in confusion each time and make my red pen edits.

Copy editing:

While I'm working on my own revisions, the original first proof is sent to the copy editor, the person responsible for checking my writing.

At this point, I've reread the story (and wrote it, to boot), and the editorial department has read it again and again, but there are always mistakes that slip by somehow. In fact, there are many of them. Bucketfuls, in fact.

The copy editor literally combs through each and every sentence to discover these errors.

They don't stop at typos, omissions, incorrect character readings, misused idioms, or incorrect use of kanji. They even find mistakes in the content of the story (for example, the wrong number of people being indicated, or using the wrong first person pronoun). After this, the first proof is sent back to the editorial department.

Honest mistakes aren't much of a problem, but I have to answer to questions that come up at this stage. This is why I visit the editorial office with my copy of the first proof, with the corrections all made.

Then we review the revised first proof and check it over, going over each point with either "leave this part as it is" or "let's fix it up". Normally we just write "As is (leave it as it is)" or "OK (OK, please make the correction)".

After that, my work is done! Not.

Step 6: Second revision, author's revisions, revision check

Then we go through the whole process again, making sure to look very closely.

The second revision is simply a check to make sure that the first proof has been revised properly.

And as it was earlier, I'm given a copy of the second revision. I go over it on my own one more time, find awkward phrases again, and despair just a tiny bit.

For your information, I found a huge mistake in this very book during this dangerous phase. I get chills just thinking about it.

I had made a typo on just one character--a number.

The mistaken version still made sense in context, so the editorial department and the copy editor didn't note this down. But if I hadn't noticed this mistake, the entire story would have been changed. What would I have done if I hadn't spotted it?

(And the fact that I can write about this incident in this afterword means--yes. I pushed back my deadline to the limit and am treading on very thin ice. I'm sorry...)

As with the first proof, the copy editor checks this proof again. It's only natural that there are fewer corrections to be made in this process, but sometimes we get even more notices at this phase than before.

I go back to the editorial department to answer those questions. I can leave them as is or make corrections.

And after this, my work is finally done.

There's a printing process after this called the "Blueprinting" phase, but this stage has almost nothing to do with me.

And that is the process by which my stories take form.

Now that I look at it written down like this, it doesn't feel that complicated at all.

Well, I guess I shouldn't lie. Even by the time I had over ten books under my belt, I still didn't have a good understanding of what second revisions or author's revisions were supposed to be. I just wrote when the editorial department told me to, and I went in to the editorial department whenever they gave me a call. I guess things all work out in the end. Heh.

And this is how these books are made, but there's something I shouldn't leave out.

That would be the fact that I am always being supported by my illustrator Kouhaku Kuroboshi-san, the employees of Ascii Media Works, everyone at the printing house, the workers who ship the books, and people who sell them, and dozens, if not hundreds of others.

Kouhaku Kuroboshi-san and I are the ones doing the creative work, but this book could never have come to bookstores without the people who undertake the process of creating this product.

I'd like to extend my thanks to every one of them once again.

My terribly long afterword is finally over. After this, I'll be moving on to my next story--my twenty-eighth book.

What to write next?

What in my head should I form into a story next?

All these thoughts I have before I take the first step make me feel warm inside. This must be what it means to be an author.

I'll go through these steps again, and meet you in the next afterward.

Sigsawa, signing off.

October 10, 2008
Sigsawa Keiichi